Love Stories of the Real West

RANCH ROMANCES

15¢

THIRD OCTOBER NUMBER

DUTY RIDER

BY L. P. HOLMES

A SHORT STORY BY
S. OMAR BARKER

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RANCH ROMANCES

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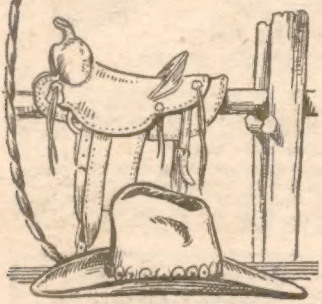

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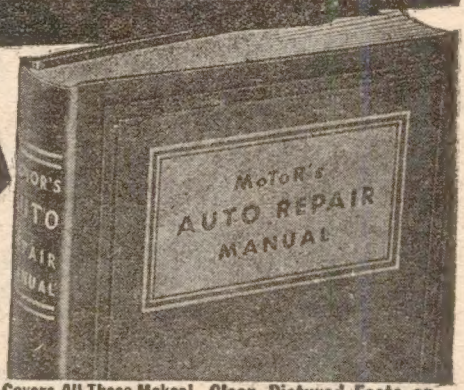

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DUTY RIDER

BY L. P. HOLMES

THE FENCE ran along the east bank of Hat Creek. It had not been there a week before, but it certainly was there now. The wire, new and bright, ran in three strands, singing tight, stapled to the trunks of handy alders and sycamores, and when the little herd of Tomahawk cattle reached it, they bunched, then spread right and left, bellowing uncertainly.

Back in the drag, Hugh Logan had been riding at ease, listening to Lynn Grayson's bright and clear voiced chatter with Bart Delage. Lynn, young, lively, and unquestionably decorative, was well worth listening to. Now, however, Hugh sensed the hesitation and bunching of the cattle and his head was up, his eyes narrowed and questing as Jug Malone and Smiley Rickart came spurring back from point.

"What," demanded Logan, "is going on up front?"

"Wire," said Smiley bluntly. "Three strands of it, running all up and down this side of Hat Creek." Then, seeing the brief flash of incredulity on Logan's face, Smiley turned to Jug Malone. "You tell him, Jug. Hugh thinks I been seeing things."

"It's there," said Jug. "Thought for a minute I was seeing things myself."

Logan said, "Come on."

He lifted his horse to a run, circling the herd, driving up to the creek, pulling in only when that wire barred his way. There he sat his saddle, leaning a trifle forward, his head swinging slowly as his eyes followed the wire first up, then downstream. He made a tall, flat shape in the saddle, and the relaxed lines of his face pulled up until the bold line of his jaw was flinty. He said, harshly, "Jug, you ride upstream, Smiley you ride down. See how far this damn stuff runs. I'll wait here for you."

Smiley and Jug swung away obediently. Logan was tapering up a cigarette when Lynn Grayson and Bart Delage came riding, wondering what it was all about. Lynn Grayson said, a startled note in her voice, "Wire! Hugh, what does this mean?"

Logan twitched his big shoulders. "Maybe that Lafe Henderling has gone suddenly loco. Also, I know now why Roan Gentry had that smug smirk on his ugly puss last time I saw him. I wondered about it then. Now I know."

"But the cattle—how are we going to get them through?"

Hugh Logan said, "We'll get them through."

Bart Delage said doubtfully, "Lafe Henderling wouldn't have strung that wire unless he intended to make it stay put. Maybe this is his way of getting back at you, Logan, for the way you spoke to him in Lake City, last week. You did take the rawhide to him pretty heavy, you know."

Logan swung his head, fixed Bart Delage with a brief, remote stare, "What," he demanded curtly, "would you have had me do, after the crack he made? Kiss him, maybe? Considering everything, it shouldn't have been left to me to tell him off, anyhow."

Bart Delage flushed. "It was the liquor in him that was talking. You don't pay any attention to what a man says, when it's liquor that's oiling his tongue."

"I do, when he makes that kind of talk," Logan retorted. "Drunk or sober, I don't let anybody talk that way and get by with it."

"What are you two talking about?" demanded Lynn Grayson. "Hugh, did you have a quarrel with Lafe Henderling?"

Logan was staring at the wire again. "No quarrel. Just an understanding."

"Understanding about what?"

Logan gave that same enigmatic twitch to his shoulders. "Things."

"You're worst than an Indian, Hugh Logan," cried Lynn in exasperation. "Bart, you tell me."

Bart Delage looked a little discomfited, almost embarrassed. "Wasn't much," he evaded. "Just a little argument between Logan and Henderling. Just words, that's all."

"You're both Indians," flared Lynn. "I don't think I like either one of you. You'd think I was an infant. If you don't wish to talk—then don't!"

She reined her pony a little to one side and sat there, her face flushed with exasperation, her glance reaching out through the

Lynn Grayson was too young, too much in love with the very color and splendor of life, to understand the menace that hung over Eden range. Yet she could learn; and Hugh Logan was the one man to guide her to that final wisdom.

scattered sycamores and alders to where the great, brooding twin peaks of the Yola Bolas lifted to the north.

CALM or angry, exasperated or content, Lynn Grayson was definitely a handsome girl, lithe and rounded, with the slim strength of tempered, thoroughbred steel. Her hair was sunny, her eyes clear and direct and spirited. There was about her always an ebullience of spirit, a breathless, eager challenge of life, an almost tiptoe exuberance. As Hugh Logan had told her one time in a moment of gentle raillery, she reminded him of a chipmunk turning handsprings on a log, ready to explode with the sheer joy of living.

Smiley Rickart came spurring back. "Down stream that wire runs clear to the end of the lake, Hugh. And I mean right to the lake. The end of it is wound round that big sycamore that leans over the falls. We'll get no cows around that end."

Hugh Logan nodded. "Expected that. Be no sense in stringing wire at all unless it made a solid barrier. I'll bet Jug finds that the upstream end runs right into the mouth of the canyon."

This surmise proved to be true, when Jug Malone came riding back, some 15 minutes later. "Upstream end is set right into the face of the east wall of the canyon," reported Jug. "Couldn't get a saddle bronc by there, much less a herd of cows."

"That," said Hugh Logan, "makes the answer simple enough. We got no wire cutters along, but there are plenty of rocks in the creek yonder. Come on."

He dismounted, climbed through the wire. Smiley and Jug followed him. Bart Delage turned to Lynn. "Logan can start plenty of trouble by cutting that wire. I'd tell him to go slow, was I you, Lynn."

Lynn hesitated, then rode close to the fence. "Hugh!" she called. "Hugh, wait a minute, I want to speak to you."

Logan spoke to Smiley and Jug, who shrugged, squatted on their heels in the alder shade and built smokes. Logan came back to the fence. "What's the matter, Burbles?" It was a nickname he had given her long ago.

She looked at him, hesitating. I think we'd better go a little slow on cutting that wire, Hugh. After all, Running H range does reach to this bank of Hat Creek, and Henderling has a right to build a fence anywhere on his property he wants to. I think we should try some other means of opening this fence, than cutting it. There's no sense in stirring up trouble that can be avoided."

That flinty look came into Logan's eyes again. "Listen, Burbles—now is as good a time as any, to get a few things straight. First off, Henderling would never have gone to the expense and trouble of building this fence if he didn't mean it to stand. What his reasons are, I expect to find out about later on. Next, Tomahawk cattle have been driving around this end of the lake ever since your father first settled on Eden range, and started raising cows for market. You know as well as I do that if we don't drive our cattle through here, we don't drive them anywhere. We can't drive around the south end of the lake because of the swamps and salt flats down there. So, we come out this way or we don't come at all. And if we can't drive cows to market the ranch goes busted. Once more, you saw that letter which Bill Barclay sent in. He wants this jag of beef at the reservation as soon as we can get it there. If we let him down, he turns somewhere else for beef to feed his Indians with. It has been a mighty sweet chunk of business for us right along, supplying beef to the Indian reservation. We can't afford to let it get away from us. There are a few things to think about. And here is one final thing."

LOGAN paused to light the cigarette he'd been building. He inhaled deeply, let the pale blue smoke seep upwards from the grim line of his lips. "While I'm foreman of Tomahawk, I'm going to be foreman. I'm going to run Tomahawk affairs the way I know your father would want them run. Any time you think Bart Delage knows more about how the interests of Tomahawk should be looked after than I do, I want you to say so, straight out. Then I'll pack my warbag and move on. Compre?"

Little devils of anger began to dance in Lynn's eyes. "You don't need to be so hard-boiled about it. After all, I am the owner of Tomahawk and I should be able to make a few suggestions. I don't want the ranch embroiled in a range war, and I can't see any sense in bulling our way through some obstacle and risking trouble, if a little common sense and arbitration can get the same result. Nothing wrong in that, is there?"

"No," murmured Logan, "not a thing

wrong, Burbles. I'm all for arbitration when it will work. But it won't, here. Use that stubborn little noggin of yours. Would Henderling have strung this wire if he intended cutting it again, just as soon as we asked him to? Would he?"

"No-o," admitted Lynn grudgingly. "No, it doesn't seem so. Only—"

"I know, Burbles. I know how your thoughts run. You love a world of brightness and sunshine and full of spring music and the songs of birds. That's fine, because that is the way the heart of you is. And I wouldn't want it any other way, not for anything. The more sunshine and music you spread, the richer you make life for all of us. But there are hard, cold, practical angles to living, too. This fence is one of them. And we got to be practical about what its effect can be on Tomahawk affairs. We just can't afford to let it stand, that's all."

Lynn was a trifle startled at the words and tone Hugh Logan used. Particularly in reference to herself. She looked at him soberly, marking the powerful sweep of his shoulders, the corded bronze of his neck and throat, the lean, penetrating grimness in his face and eyes. She remembered how utterly her father had trusted Hugh Logan's judgement. How, in fact, during her father's failing years, he had leaned more and more heavily on Hugh Logan's energy and strength and integrity turning over the entire management of Tomahawk to his foreman and being quite content with the result.

"Very well," she said quietly. "If you think it best, Hugh."

The grimness of his face broke and his smile flashed through, quick and white. "Good girl, Burbles. You go on, dancing on the clouds and leave the tough chores up to me and the boys. We won't let you down."

He turned and called to Smiley and Jug. "Get those rocks, boys. We got miles to cover."

Now a new voice sounded, blunt and challenging. Over from behind a willow clump, a man stepped into view. It was Roan Gentry, foreman of Lafe Henderling's Running H spread. He carried a rifle and he said, "Lay off that fence, Logan. We didn't build it to stand by and see it cut. Lay off it!"

Roan Gentry was burly, not as tall as Logan, but with a thick, barrel-like power to him. His shoulders were sloping, his arms long and ropey. His face was flat, his features blunt. His hair, which gave him his name, was coarse and rusty.

Hugh Logan, after the first alert jerk of his head at Gentry's appearance, stood for a long moment, very still, his glance fixed on the Running H foreman. Then he murmured softly, "So-o! Beat the brush and the snakes crawl out. Well, no time like the present to find out how much is rattle and how much is sting. Go ahead, Smiley—Jug. Get some rocks and bust that wire. I'll keep an eye on friend Roan, here."

SMILEY and Jug came back from the creek bed lugging some rocks. They started on the lower wire first. Jug held a solid niggerhead against the bottom of the wire. Smiley, with a smaller rock, began pounding the trapped wire, flattening and crystallizing the taut metal. Soon it would part. The wire hummed and twanged under the impacts, and the clack of the pounding rock set sharp echoes up and down the creek.

Roan Gentry shifted his rifle slightly. "I said, lay off that wire!" There was harsh threat in his tone.

Smiley and Jug did not even bother to glance his way. And Lynn Grayson, tense and fearful, thought, "They trust Hugh. They trust him utterly. They're not afraid of Gentry and his gun while Hugh is watching him."

Logan said, "If it's bluff, Roan—why then it's been called. If it's not bluff, you better get busy, else the wire will be cut before you get your mind made up."

Even as Logan spoke, that first wire twanged in parting, the cut ends whipping back and coiling against the trunks of the trees to which they were stapled. Without pause or hesitation, Jug and Smiley started on the second wire.

Roan Gentry stared at Hugh Logan venemously. Logan was relaxed almost to an easy slouch. But his thumbs were hooked in his gun belts, putting his hands only inches away from the big, black butts of the guns sagging there. And his eyes were sparked with cold watchfulness.

Roan Gentry let his rifle swing loose in his hand. "All right," he growled. "So you've cut our fence. The result of that will catch up with you later."

Gentry turned and went down to the creek, crossing it by jumping from boulder to boulder. From a thicket on the far bank he led a

HUGH LOGAN *LYNN GRAYSON*

horse. He slid his rifle into the saddle scabbard, swung up and rode away without a backward glance. The second wire parted and Smiley and Jug started in on the final strand of the fence.

Soon that strand gave way and the fence was open. Jug and Smiley immediately came through, got their horses and began bunching the cattle again. Lynn and Bart Delage helped them, and soon Hugh Logan was guiding the leaders of the little herd through the fence opening. They splashed across the clear, cold waters of Hat Creek, broke into the open beyond, taking the old, beaten trail toward Lake City.

Lynn put her pony to a lope and rode up beside Hugh Logan, who was now at point. She looked over at him soberly. "I hope you are right, Hugh. Gentry looked pretty mean."

Logan looked at her, grinned. "We got through, didn't we? And Bill Barclay will get his beef. Only—"

"Only what?"

"I'm wondering what Gentry has up his sleeve. He gave way a little too easy. Me, I never did cotton to Roan Gentry. There's a streak in him I don't like. But one thing I know. He's got his share of salt. He ain't the sort to knuckle under as easy as he did, unless he had it figured that way from the first. Like he was just going through the motions of some part of a plan. Yeah, Roan gave in a little too easy to make it convincing."

A MILE north of Lake City, the herd was turned off west, on the drive trail that passed around the town. Jug Malone was up at point now, with Smiley Rickart at drag. Hugh Logan said, "Bed 'em at Benson's, same as usual, Smiley, and take 'em on to the reservation tomorrow. Tell Bill Barclay to give us a little more time on the next order, and we'll give him still better beef."

The little herd of 50 beef cattle, under the care of the two punchers, plodded on to the west. Logan rode into Lake City with Lynn Grayson and Bart Delage. Butte Street was empty and lazy in the late morning sunshine, and the west wind, just beginning to blow, whipped up little filaments of dust smoke along the well trampled way.

Logan, whistling a little, turned to Lynn. "Come on in to Overhalter's, and I'll buy you a licorice whip." His eyes were twinkling.

Lynn wrinkled her nose and sniffed disdainfully. "I'll have you understand that I am no longer a child. You can't seem to understand that I'm completely grown up, Hugh Logan."

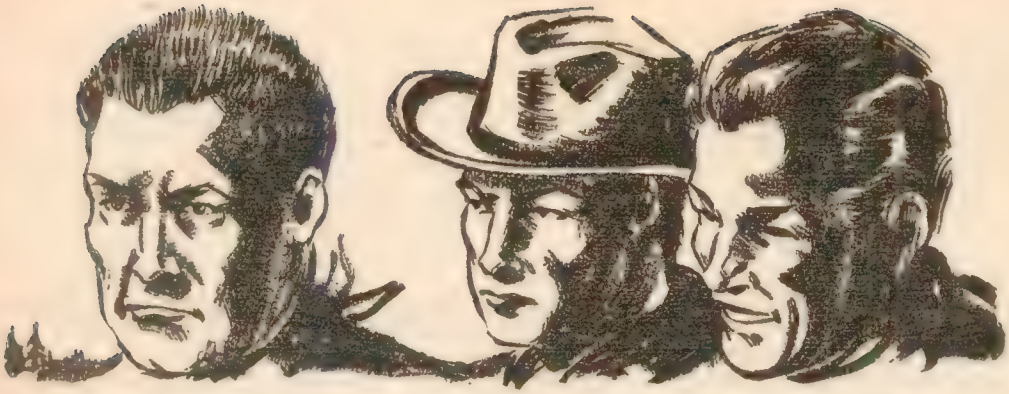
He met her eyes quizzically. "Burbles," he drawled, "you'll be looking for fairies under every toadstool you see when you're 90 years old."

She tossed her sunny head. "Maybe so. But I won't be chewing on licorice whips. Thank you, Mister Logan. I'm visiting with Mother Peabody. If you're still around after that, holler as you go by and I'll ride home with you."

Lynn touched spurs to her pony and sped away toward Mother Peabody's neat little white cottage, standing at the far edge of town. Logan turned to Delage. "Buy you a drink, Bart?"

Delage shook his head. "Got a little business at Overhalter's. Then I'll drift along home. Thanks."

Delage swung his horse in to the rail in



ROAN GENTRY *BART DELAGE* *JOHNNY McNULTY*

front of Dutch Overhalter's store. Logan rode on to the Two Star. His face had sobered again. He was thinking about Lynn Grayson and Bart Delage and not liking his thoughts. His own feelings toward Lynn he kept deeply covered up, hardly admitting them even to himself. Only one thing mattered, he told himself. That was, Lynn must be happy, always. And he wondered if Bart Delage was the man to make and keep her happy.

Funny sort of jigger, Bart Delage. A moody sort, given to fits of brooding. No particular cause for him to be that way, either. He had a pretty nice little spread of his own over past the southwest corner of the lake, his cows were having calves regular, and he was selling beef for money. An average man would have felt pretty chipper with Bart Delage's setup. But there was that gloomy, pessimistic streak in Bart.

What effect this would have on Lynn's cheerful, bustling eagerness and brightness was hard to say. To date it hadn't affected it in any way that Logan could see. And there was no question that Lynn was plenty fond of Bart. Maybe there was a pull between the two contrasts. Sometimes that happened with people.

A voice, rich with brogue and cheerfully mocking, broke in on Logan's thoughts. "By the looks of him, you'd think he had something on his mind aside from his hat. By the looks of him, you would."

Logan snapped out of his thoughts to look down at a grimming, Irish face. He said, "They got careless and let it out of its cage again." Then he swung down, punched ribs, and had his own thumped in return.

"Johnny McNulty!" declared Logan. "The Sage of Vinegar Flat. What did you do, wild man, use your razor for slicing bacon?"

"A man's whiskers are his own concern," declared Johnny. "I'll nurse mine in my own way. And where will you be heading, Mister Logan?"

"Into the Two Star, to buy you a drink. I wanted to buy Lynn a licorice whip at Dutch Overhalter's and she turned me down flat. Then I offered to buy Bart Delage a drink, and it was no go there. Nobody seems to want to help me spend my money."

"Get your hand in your pocket, Mister Logan," chuckled Johnny. "You've found yourself a customer this trip."

THEY pushed through the swinging doors of the Two Star, these old and tried friends, and soon had drinks before them. There was only one other customer in the place, and Hugh Logan was a trifle startled to see that it was Lafe Henderling. A tall, thin, morose sort, Henderling was sitting at a table in a far corner of the room. He had a bottle and glass before him, and the contents line of the bottle was already well down. Henderling was staring straight ahead, leaning on his elbows. His long lips hung loose and his eyes had a stary, glazed look. Plainly, Lafe Henderling was already far gone. Logan caught Sam Tabor's eye and jerked his head. Sam Tabor shrugged.

"Been hitting it up all morning," murmured the Two Star proprietor. "Came in right after I opened up. Dunno what's bitin' him. Was he an ordinary drunk, I'd have throwed him out long ago. But I let him sit here, he's bein' quiet."

"I can remember when he was a teetotaler,"

said Johnny McNulty softly. "Too bad. But every man should know his own capacity."

"Mine is two," said Logan. "Have another, Johnny."

Sam Tabor poured the drinks, waved away the money. "On the house. How are things at Vinegar Flat, Johnny?"

"Interesting," said Johnny drily. "Been shot at twice in the last week."

Hugh Logan swung his head. "What's that? Or are you kidding?"

Johnny pulled off his battered old sombrero and pointed to a hole in the crown. "Thirty-thirty, at a guess. Whoever threw that slug at me wasn't kidding."

"Go on," said Logan. "You can't stop now."

"The first try wasn't that close," said Johnny. "I'm riding the cedar brakes east of the Flat, trying to flush an old droop horn of mine that was due to drop a calf. I'd seen her in there about a week before, and knew she'd soon have a little bummer following her. Well, there's been a couple of lobo wolves howling out through there, and I didn't want the old cow to run foul of those lobos with a new born calf on her hands. I figured to locate her and drive her and the bummer closer in to headquarters.

"All of a once, over in the cedars a rifle cut loose. The slug burned my bronc right across the haunches, right on top, just behind the cantle. Not deep enough to draw blood, but deep enough to spook the bronc and set it to pitchin'. Time I got that fool horse straightened out, I'd more or less lost the location of that shot. I did some ridin' but didn't come across anything. So I found the cow and her bummer, and the three of us got the hell out of there.

"Couple or three days ran along, and I was about ready to figure that first shot as being a sort of accident. Then last evening, I'm right along side of the cabin, bringing in some fire wood. Whacko! The slug cut right through my hat and slammed into the side of the cabin. I dug for cover, pronto, got my own Winchester, and tried to catch a look at that cussed dry gulch. Could I have got a bead on him, I'd sure waltzed him off this vale of tears. About then I was sure one mad Irisher. But nary a glimpse did I glimpse. Come dark I did some more prowling, but found nothing. So I figured to amble into town today and find somebody who'd buy me a drink to settle my nerves."

"You're a cantankerous little squirt," said Hugh Logan soberly. "But I can't think of anybody who's got it in for you, that bad. It don't make sense, Johnny."

Johnny shrugged. "Can't figure it, myself. All I know is, it happened. I been sort of waiting for Joe Studinger to come along, so I could pass my troubles on to him. He's sheriffin' these parts, not me."

There was a stir, back in that far corner where Lafe Henderling sat. Chair legs scraped. Sam Tabor murmured, "Looks like he's had enough."

LAFE HENDERLING was on his feet, staring straight ahead. He came along the room, moving with that set and contained concentration common to those far gone in liquor. He paid no attention at all to Hugh or Johnny or Sam Tabor. Apparently, as far as he was concerned, they did not exist for Lafe Henderling. And instead of going out the front way into the street, he went out the back door of the Two Star.

"Not too drunk," observed Johnny McNulty. "He knows where to go sleep it off without having everybody looking at him. Just the same, I hate to see any man get that far gone. Especially when he was once a—"

The shot sounded, heavy and flat, with a muffled echo as though it were rolling right along the ground. And it came from right out back, where Lafe Henderling had just gone.

Hugh Logan beat Johnny McNulty and Sam Tabor to the back door by a jump. They burst out into the clear dazzle of sunlight, then stopped in their tracks. Over there, not 20 feet distant lay Lafe Henderling. His head was a welter of blood and there was no question but that he was dead. That showed in the way he seemed to be shrinking down into the earth. In his right hand was still gripped his own gun, a little filament of smoke still curling from the muzzle.

They bent over him for a moment, then straightened up. Hugh Logan said slowly, "Shuffled himself off. That beats me."

Soon there were a number of men gathered. Sheriff Joe Studinger was there and somebody went after Doc Laverne. Presently the body was carried away and Joe Studinger asked some questions. Hugh and Sam Tabor and Johnny McNulty told all they knew. Studinger listened, nodded and went away. For a time Sam Tabor had quite a rush of trade. Hugh and Johnny drifted out front into the street.

They saw a rider speed out of town and knew that Joe Studinger had dispatched word to the Running H headquarters.

Johnny McNulty said, "Reckon he'd taken on so much likker he was beginning to see pink elephants, and he couldn't stand the strain."

Hugh Logan shook his head. "No. He was seeing something else besides pink elephants, Johnny. Something a lot more real and troublesome."

"But—what?" argued Johnny.

Hugh Logan shrugged. "We'll have to wait until time shows us."

Noon came, and Hugh and Johnny ate at the Triangle hashhouse. Afterwards, cigarettes going, they were on the street when Roan Gentry and a couple of Running H cow hands came spurring into town. They stopped at Joe Studinger's office.

"What'll be happening to the Running H, do you imagine, Hugh?" asked Johnny. "Did Lafe Henderling have any folks that you know of?"

Hugh shook his head. "Never heard of any."

Johnny threw his cigarette butt away, yawned and stretched. "I'm heading back for Vinegar Flat. Ain't used to this kind of excitement. Got me all wore out. I'm picking up my sack of grub at Dutch Overhalter's and spreading my wings for home."

"You ain't told Joe Studinger about those two shots that were thrown your way," reminded Hugh.

"I know. Wouldn't do any good right now, anyhow. Joe's got something else on his mind."

Hugh frowned down at his stocky little friend. "I'm going to worry about you, Sawed-Off. You ought to have somebody up at the Flat with you. With two men around, a dry gulcher ain't near so liable to try his dirty stuff. You pick yourself up a stray hand, and board him for the next month or six weeks. Be company for you, too."

"Huh!" scoffed Johnny. "Any time I need a nurse, I'll jump off Cherokee Rim and get it over with. Don't worry about me. I'll get along."

Hugh went down to the store and saw Johnny off for his long ride into Vinegar Flat. From there Hugh turned back uptown, intending to get his horse, ride up past Mother Peabody's cottage and pick up Lynn Grayson. But Joe Studinger put his head out of his office door and called, "Oh, Hugh! Could I see you a minute?"

Hugh crossed over and went in. Roan Gentry was there with Joe Studinger. The sheriff said, "Hugh, what's this trouble about a fence? Roan here tells me you cut a Running H line fence this morning."

Hugh reached for his smoking. "Did he tell you where that fence was, Joe?"

"Said it was along Hat Creek."

"Exactly! Plumb from the north end of Blue Lake to the mouth of Hat Canyon. Stopping up our old drive trail. I had a jag of beef that Bill Barclay had ordered for the reservation. Bill was in a hurry for that beef. So I cut the fence. Likewise and besides, we might as well make one issue clear. I'll keep on cutting such a fence. Tomahawk has been driving beef around the north end of the lake and across Hat Creek from the day Henry Grayson first settled on Eden range. It's going to keep on driving them by the same trail."

Studinger frowned, looking at Gentry. "What's the big idea, Roan? You got no right to throw a line fence across a drive trail like that."

"I got plenty of right," growled Gentry. "I can build a fence anywhere I damn well please on my own property."

"What's that? Did you say—your property?"

"I did. And that's exactly what I mean. My property. You might as well get that through your heads now as later. The Running H belongs to me. Me, Roan Gentry. And right here—" Gentry tapped a pocket—"right here is the signed deed proving it. So I build a fence on my own property, and Logan cuts it. He cuts it against my objections, ready to make a gunplay if he has to. So I'm swearing out a warrant for Logan's arrest, Studinger—a warrent charging trespass and wilful destruction of property."

HUGH LOGAN and Lynn Grayson rode home by the long trail around the south end of Blue Lake. They passed between Bart Delage's Lazy D headquarters and the lake shore and took the tricky riding trail across the two mile wide swamp, formed and fed by the lake's overflow. Here was a regular little wilderness of bog and morass, of tule patch and bottomless ooze. The saddle trail was narrow and winding, looping back and forth upon itself, searching out a tricky way of reasonably solid footing. It took nearly

four miles of riding to cover the two miles of swamp width. Logan rode in the lead, with Lynn pressing close at his pony's heels. Once Logan stopped and swept an indicating hand.

"Look it over, Lynn," he said. "What possible chance would we have driving a herd of cows through here? See that nice, smooth, green patch yonder? Can't you just see a cow critter heading out there for a couple of grabs at that grass? Well, let me tell you something. Any cow or horse that moved on to that patch would be sucked out of sight in five minutes by the watch. There's hundreds more places just like that spot all through this swamp. You couldn't lead one cow through here safe, let alone drive a herd through. You couldn't make 'em stay to this crazy, winding trail. You'd bog and lose 500 head in the first mile. You know, there have been a few cases of riders who didn't know the trail, starting through this swamp and never coming out again. So, let's get one thing straight and final. We drive our cattle out by way of Hat Creek, or we don't drive 'em at all."

Lynn did not argue. She was sober and subdued looking. In a way this swamp was beautiful, but it was a treacherous, mocking beauty. In every tule patch there were swarms of red winged black birds, and the silver tinkling of their songs was like the chiming of a thousand fairy bells. Marsh wrens flitted and twittered. Bitterns gave their harsh and lonely calls and winged heavily across the sky. Wild ducks lifted with a quacking spatter, to circle with curve-winged beauty. Ordinarily, Lynn would have been entranced, for she had long loved the comings and goings, the sight and sound of the little feathered folk of the lake. But just now she was thinking of the momentous events of the past few hours, and in them she could find no cause for gaiety.

When the horses finally put the swamp behind them with snorts of relief, Lynn moved up beside her foreman, and they jogged the cattle trail following the shore line of the lake.

"I still can't realize that it is true, Hugh," she said. "That—that Lafe Henderling killed himself. And that now Roan Gentry turns up as the real owner of the Running H. I can't understand it. Are you sure that deed Gentry has isn't a fake?"

"Joe Studinger made Gentry produce that deed, and Joe and I looked it over plenty careful," answered Logan. "Far as Joe and I could see, it was legal enough. Lafe Henderling had signed it, and it was witnessed by a notary over in Mountain View. Joe told me on the side that he was going to check up farther, have a talk with that notary. But I'm accepting it as legal. Roan Gentry is a little too slick and sly to try and put over a fake."

"But what does it all mean? Do you think that has anything to do with what—with Lafe Henderling's death?"

"No question. No sane man takes the jump Henderling did without cause. And Lafe Henderling was sane enough. Once, and not so awful long ago, either, Lafe Henderling was what you'd call a pretty good man. He and your father were friendly, always got along. Once Henderling was a teetotaler, never touched liquor. Then, of a sudden he began to hit the bottle, heavier and heavier. He turned surly, mean-mouthed. Sort of a normal reaction I'd say, of a man who was watching everything he valued in life slipping away from him, and not being able to do a thing to stop it. And finally, when it was all gone, closing the book with a bang. Like Henderling did. I don't know how Roan Gentry got hold of the Running H, but you can bet there's been some dirty euchering somewhere."

"But he's got it," said Lynn, mournfully. "And he's fenced us off from the rest of the world, you might say. And had you arrested for cutting that fence."

Hugh Logan smiled bleakly. "I don't feel like a criminal. That arrest is a joke. He knows it as well as I and Joe Studinger do. Yeah, Joe arrested me, then turned me loose on my own recognizance. That is as far as it will go, I reckon. If Roan Gentry wants to make anything more of it, it's up to him to spur it through the courts. He knows I'd plead not guilty and call for a jury trial. And he knows no jury this side of hell would convict me. In the end it would cost him money and get him nowhere."

"Then why call for the arrest in the first place?"

"To get it on the record, I suppose. Might want to refer to it later on."

Lynn looked about her with moody eyes. "We won't be able to call it Eden range any longer, Hugh. Not with trouble moving in."

Hugh Logan chuckled. "Seems to me there was trouble in the original Garden of Eden, Burbles. We can't kick if we get a little of the same here. Come on; chin up. We'll just sit back a while and let Mister Roan Gentry

strut his stuff. Then, when he gets too swelled up we'll stick a pin in him."

TOMAHAWK headquarters stood back about a half mile from the east side of Blue Lake. The steady, gradual slope of the range which ran from the lake's east shore, clear back to the long, curving scarp of Cherokee Rim, put the ranchhouse considerably above the lake level and gave a full, sweeping view of the lake, from end to end.

North and south the lake ran, a full twelve miles long. At its widest, the lake waters spread a good three miles, deep blue and shimmering when the sun shone, gray and dull when the storm clouds came scudding down from the Yola Bola Peaks to the north. In clear weather and especially in the early morning, when the first sun came burning up from beyond Cherokee Rim, one could look from the porch of the Tomahawk ranchhouse, right across the lake to Lake City, and with a pair of good field glasses, could see riders moving up and down Butte Street.

Cherokee Rim, nine miles east of headquarters, ran its brooding, level-topped way in a great curve, north end merging with the eastern, timberclad shoulder of the Yola Bolas. South, the rim ran out and lost itself in the salt flats and swamp below the lake. And on that great spread of range, walled in by the rim on the east and the lake on the west, there grew grass of such quality and succulence as to make Tomahawk beef the envy of every cattleman within 100 mile radius. It was the reason why Bill Barclay, agent at the Indian reservation over past Lake City, bought Tomahawk beef to feed his wards, ahead of any other.

Over this policy there had been many a roar from other cattlemen. To these complaints Bill Barclay had one answer. "Bring me beef on a quality par with Tomahawk stuff, and I'll buy it. I'm spending taxpayer's money and I want full valued received."

So there lay the Tomahawk spread, fenced by nature and peculiarly rich in water and grass. Once called the "Garden of Eden" by a less fortunate and envious cattleman, the name had stuck, was shortened to Eden range. It had one drawback, never realized until now. The only way to drive cattle out of it was by way of that relatively narrow gap between the north end of Blue Lake and the mouth of precipitous Hat Creek Canyon. While Lafe Henderling lived and owned Running H, that had never been a problem. But with Roan Gentry owning the Running H, and Lafe Henderling dead at his own hand, Running H had in effect become as a cork in a bottle.

The one break in all the entire sweep of Cherokee Rim was the narrow chimney of Thunder Gap, and here the waters of Silver Creek burst through, cascading down a full 200 feet, before cutting a way down to the lake, just north of Tomahawk headquarters, supplying the ranch with a constant source of cold, sweet water.

Sitting on the porch steps of the Tomahawk ranchhouse, Hugh Logan smoked and thought and listened to the muted song of Silver Creek through the heavy dusk. One after another his mind laid out in orderly fashion the happenings of the day. That fence along Hat Creek and its threat and implications. The death of Lafe Henderling at his own hands. The discovery that Roan Gentry now owned Running H. His arrest at Gentry's insistence, for little more than nuisance value, if that. And finally, Hugh thought about those two mysterious shots taken at Johnny McNulty, at Johnny's little mountain ranch, way over past Cherokee Rim.

Some of these things were obviously interrelated, but not all. Yet, with nagging insistence the conviction came to Hugh that all of them were part and parcel of some ominous threat to Tomahawk. As yet he could not tie them together.

LYNN Grayson came out and perched herself beside him, elbows on knees, chin cupped in her hands. In gingham dress and house apron, she seemed very young and girlish. She tipped her bright head against the solid breadth of Hugh Logan's shoulder and said plaintively, "Hugh, I'm scared."

"Scared! What of, Burbles?"

"Nothing—and everything. Like a cloud you can feel but not see. A sinister cloud, pressing in and catching you by the throat."

Logan chuckled. As a rule, he always ate out at the cookshack with the rest of the crew. Once in a while he ate with Lynn. This evening, at her insistence, he had done so. Now he said, "Told you not to eat that second helping of ham. Knew it would give you the jumps. That's what you get for being greedy."

Lynn straightened up, pulled her head away from his shoulder. "There you go again," she charged with swift temper, "treating me like I was an infant. When are you going to realize

I'm grown up and entitled to the respect of my years?"

Logan jeered gently. "Listen to her talk. All grown up, she claims. And her still trying to mimic the call of the killdeer plover down at the lake shore. Or hanging on her stomach over the top rail of the corral, trying to tease a lizard out of a hole in a corral post. How the child does talk!"

"You—!" blazed Lynn. "You—!"

She jumped up, grabbed him by the shoulders and tried to shake him. For her strength it was like trying to shake a mountain. She tried so hard she lost her balance and was falling across Logan's knees when he caught her, his arms cushioning her gently.

He grinned down at her. "Little scratch-cat! For a cent I'd whale you."

She fumed up at him, then of a sudden went very still, held in the cradle of his arms. And with her stillness Logan's smile faded, his face going gentle and brooding. Lynn's breath was coming and going very swiftly. "Hugh!" she murmured. "Why Hugh—!"

Out of the night came the rattle of hoofs, swift hoofs, racing with urgency. The sound broke through the utter pause in the soundless clamor of marching time, which had, for a few short spellbound seconds, existed for Hugh Logan and Lynn Grayson.

Lynn felt the tension of the alert ripple through Logan. Then he swung her up and set her on her feet as effortlessly as if she were truly a child, got to his own feet and moved out to meet that incoming rider. Sounded the splash and plunge of the horse fording Silver Creek.

Hugh Logan's voice reached out, curt and challenging. "Yeah—who is it?"

The answer came in Smiley Rickart's voice. weary and thick. "Hugh—Hugh—glad I was —able to make it!"

Lynn ran out there, her heart in her throat. She was just in time to see the dark bulk of Smiley Rickart lean and sway, then topple out of the saddle. Hugh Logan caught him as he fell. "Smiley!" cried Logan. "Smiley, what is it, boy?"

With Logan's help, Smiley managed to keep his feet. "They jumped us," mumbled Smiley. "They jumped Jug and me—right in the middle of the Serpentine Hills, this side of Benson's. They run the herd to hell an' gone back into the Serpentines. They got lead into both Jug and me. I was out—for a while. When I come to, the herd was gone. Everything gone but Jug and me and my bronc. I come out of it, Hugh—but Jug didn't. Jug's dead. They got him, Hugh, they got old Jug!"

There was something of the wounded animal in Hugh Logan's cold snarl. "They? Who are they, Smiley?"

"Couldn't tell," groaned Smiley. "Couldn't tell, Hugh. There was four or five of them. They hit us sudden—shootin'. They down Jug—they down me—they run the cattle off. I go out right about then. Afterwards, it was like I told you. God, I'm tired—tired!"

Smiley sagged, and Hugh Logan had to carry him into the ranchhouse.

UP ON the best horse in his remuda string, Hugh Logan thundered through the night. According to Smiley, who, after they got him into the ranchhouse, and gave him a cup of hot black coffee, well loaded with whiskey, was able to talk some more, he had come back around the north end of the lake and had found the wire fence still open. So Logan headed out that way and sped along to Lake City. There he first routed out Doc Laverne and headed him for Tomahawk headquarters, to take care of Smiley Rickart. After which Logan went to the livery barn, ordered out a buckboard and driver, and while this outfit was being made ready, hunted up Sheriff Joe Studinger, whom he found in the Two Star, playing cribbage with Dutch Overhalter.

COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

RIMROCK RIDDLES

A Splendid Novel of the Romantic West

By MARIE DE NERVAUD

The minute Studinger saw Logan's face, he laid down his cards. "What is it, Hugh?"

Logan jerked his head. "Come on, Joe."

They went out into the street. "Get your bronc, Joe," said Logan. "Riding to do. That herd of 50 beeves I sent off to the reservation? Well, in the Serpentines a gang jumped Jug Malone and Smiley Rickart, shootin'. They downed Jug for good, they shot up Smiley some and probably left him for dead. They run the cattle back into the Serpentines somewhere. Smiley managed to make it home. I've sent out Doc Laverne to patch him up. There's a buckboard and driver gettin' ready at the stable, to go out with us after Jug. Time you get your bronc, we'll be ready to roll."

Joe Studinger said simply, "I'll be damned! What's this range coming to." Then he hurried off.

Smiley had given Hugh the best idea he could of where to find Jug Malone. Yet it was well after midnight before they located the body of the faithful old Tomahawk rider. In silence they loaded the still, stiffened figure into the back of the buckboard, covered it with blankets. The buckboard driver headed back for Lake City.

Hugh Logan paused now long enough to build a cigarette. Then, his voice harsh and jerky, he burst out, "Somebody is going to get hurt for this, Joe. Hurt damn bad! They've started something they won't be able to finish. Don't ask me to walk soft and wait for the law. Hell with that stuff!"

Joe Studinger said, almost mildly, "Did you hear me say a thing? Where now?"

"Benson's."

They drove on through the dark and just as gray dawn was seeping out of the sky, came down out of the Serpentines to the stage station at Benson's. Here were half a dozen weather-beaten buildings, backed by a corral. Half a dozen horses were in the corral and Logan, dismounting, climbed the fence. One

after another he cornered those horses, ran his palm along their backs and their bellies. Two he paused beside, reading the brands. After which he left the corral and went over to the larger building, the chimney of which was spirling straight up into the chill morning air. He moved into the place, Joe Studinger at his heels.

ABE DARNELL, who ran Benson's, along with several other men, was just sitting down to breakfast. A big, ruddy-faced man, Darnell looked at Hugh and Joe Studinger with surprise. "Riding early, ain't you, gents? But no matter. You're just in time. Grab a plate and belly up."

"In a minute, Abe," growled Logan. He looked along the table, studying each man closely. A couple of them he knew as Darnell's roustabouts. There were a couple of drummers in store clothes, layovers waiting for the Mountain View stage. There were three strange riders. "Which of you three are riding those Broken Arrow broncs out in the corral?" Hugh demanded.

"I am, for one," answered a rider. "Me and Simmy, here. What's the matter? They're honest broncs."

"When did you drag in here?"

"Late. Must have been midnight."

Hugh looked at Abe Darnell, who nodded. "What brought you riding so late?" growled Hugh.

"Came in from Mountain View. That's a long ride. And now, mister, just to make this even, who in hell are you and what business is it of yours where and when me and my partner ride?"

"You can prove you left Mountain View yesterday mornin'?"

"Yeah, we can prove it, if we have to. Why should we?"

"Because yesterday, back in the Serpentines, one honest puncher was killed and another wounded. And fifty head of prime beef cattle were run off. For that little trick, somebody is going to kick it out on the end of a rope. And the loop in that rope will fit anybody it has to fit. Compre?"

At this news the defiance ran out of the rider. He said quietly, "Don't blame you for being on the prod. But me and Simmy ain't that sort. And if you want to back track with us, we'll show you we came from Mountain View."

The fellow's glance was level and steady. Hugh nodded. "No need. I believe you. All right, Joe, let's have some breakfast."

Abe Darnell plainly wanted to ask questions, but wisely held his tongue. It was easy to see there was a black and turgid fury seething in Hugh Logan. His eyes were as coldly gray as the heart of an iceberg, his face bleak and wintry. He ate to satisfy pure animal hunger, but with no further thought of his food than that. He was pushing back his chair while he rolled his after-breakfast cigarette.

"You might go back where it happened, Joe, and see if you can pick up any sign which means anything," he said to Studinger. "I got to ride out to the reservation and see Bill Barclay. I'll meet you in the Serpentines around noon."

With that he went out, hit the leather and spurred away. Abe Darnell looked at Joe Studinger and said, "Somebody has stirred up a tornado, Joe. Who was it got killed?"

"Jug Malone. Smiley Rickart got jimmed up some. It was Tomahawk beef for the reservation that got run off."

"That somebody should try and cut in on that reservation beef business, I been expecting for a long time," said Darnell. "But if this is the first step in such a scheme, somebody is dragging himself a long, long rope. For there are some men you just don't stir up and get on the war path. Hugh Logan is one of them. Unless a man is all damn fool, he just don't fool with dynamite."

Joe Studinger, not as young as he once had been, shrugged a little wearily. "It's going to be my job trying to hold Hugh down. And I'm afraid I can't do it. Well, thanks, Abe."

BILL Barclay, Indian Agent at the Reservation, sat in his bare little Government office and listened gravely to Hugh Logan's story. "So that's why you won't have any beef today, Bill," Hugh ended. "But there'll be some in by tomorrow afternoon. I got the crew making a fast roundup of 50 head first thing this morning, with orders to have the herd on its way as soon as possible. It should be here by tomorrow afternoon sometime. It won't be quite as good stuff as you've been getting, but it should pass, this trip. Next time we'll see you get the usual top grade. Satisfactory?"

Barclay nodded. "Quite, Hugh. For that matter it wouldn't hurt my Warwhoops none to go without beef for a few days. I been feedin' 'em pretty good and I don't think

they'd squawk. But who the hell do you figure pulled that raid?"

Hugh shrugged. "Things been happening over Blue Lake way. Maybe this raid is part of the same ball of twine. Can't tell, yet. Anyhow, I wanted you to know why your beef didn't show today. Now I got to be rambling."

By the time Hugh Logan got back into the Serpentines, his horse was definitely beginning to show the pace and the best Logan could get out of it, breasting the slope of the hills, was a weary shuffle. At the crest, about where the raid had taken place, Joe Studinger rode out from behind a shelf of rock.

He said, "I been clear back to Glass Mountain. They drove those cattle bunched, that far. Then they broke 'em up into half a dozen little jags, and broke around the slopes of Glass Mountain, some east, some west, and all still going north."

Logan nodded. "Figured something like that. Was I a cow thief and in their boots, that's how I'd have done it. Scattering the sign. Well, that angle will keep for a while. We'll get along home."

Studinger said, "I get a night's sleep under my belt and a fresh bronc. I aim to follow some of that scattered sign, Hugh. It's got to lead somewhere."

They headed back, Logan keeping to the drive trail, Studinger cutting away for Lake City. Logan's first explosive fury had topped off somewhat, leaving him quieter, but full of a settled, bleak purpose. His mind was again beginning to work with methodical clarity, totaling up, adding, discarding, searching always for the answer.

As he came in on the northern bulge of the lake, he glimpsed over on his left, the gleam of color in the foothills which marked the Running H headquarters. With abrupt decision he reined that way, soon putting behind him the intervening two miles.

Running H had always been a bachelor layout, and showed it. The ranchhouse was small and square, needing a new coat of paint, and the rest of the layout showed the same lack of care. The place seemed deserted, except for three men over by the cavvy corral, who seemed engaged in some sort of argument.

Two of these men Logan knew. The third was a stranger. Of the two he knew, one was Ollie Halleck, the other Punch Goettling. It seemed to Logan, as he rode up, that Ollie Halleck looked at him with vast relief. Halleck, a thin, faded-out looking rider was sweating, his mouth nervous and working. And behind the relief in his eyes was a great and nagging fear. On the other hand, Punch Goettling had a mean, surly look about him and he eyed Hugh Logan with a distinct unwelcome. The third man, the stranger, had that look about him which caused Logan to give him a cold, measuring appraisal, such as a man would give to anything which had danger marked on it. The fellow was of medium height, on the wiry side, stony of face and eye.

Logan said, "Where's Gentry?"

"Hill range, somewhere," growled Goettling. "I'll tell him you called, Logan."

"Needn't," said Logan briefly. "Wouldn't make him happy."

SOMETHING was going on here, between these three. Building a smoke, Logan tried to put his finger on it, while he let his glance run here and there. There was still no sign of any but these three riders about the place. His glance came back to Halleck. "What you sweating about, Ollie?" he asked.

Halleck swallowed heavily, his scrawny throat working. "Nothin' much, Hugh. Just going to quit. Stick around a minute, and I'll ride down the trail with you."

The remark sounded casual, but it wasn't. Behind it lay an appeal, distinct and desperate the reaching of a weaker man for the support and backing of one stronger. Punch Goettling spat harshly, "Damn it, Halleck, I told you you'd have to take up your quitting problems with Roan Gentry! I got no authority to let you quit. You're sticking around until Roan gets back."

Logan murmured, "First time I ever heard of a man needing any authority but his own to quit, Punch."

Goettling said bluntly, "None of your affair, Logan. Keep out of it!"

Hugh shifted a trifle in his saddle, then said quietly, "Go ahead, Ollie. Catch up your bronc. I'll wait for you."

With a gulp of relief, Halleck grabbed a rope, climbed into the cavvy corral and shook out a loop. Goettling cursed, swung to face Logan fully. The stony-faced strange rider spat and said, "How far do you want to carry this, Goettling? I don't like to be left in the dark."

Hugh Logan said softly, "Mister, you can

carry it just as far as you want. That goes for you, too, Goettling. Now do we, or don't we?"

Punch Goettling seemed to be weighing things, measuring them. And plainly the swing of the scales didn't suit him. He growled, "Let it lay, Devers. Hell with Halleck. Let him go."

And there the cards lay, while Ollie Halleck, in a fever of hurry, caught and saddled. When Halleck swung into the saddle, Hugh said, "No time coming, Ollie? Not even a warbag?"

Halleck said, "This outfit don't owe me anything, and I don't owe it anything. All I want to do is get out of here."

"Then," drawled Hugh, "we might as well drift."

Halleck needed no second invitation, heading out at a fast jog. Logan followed him, a little more leisurely, riding sideways in his saddle, so that he might keep an eye on Punch Goettling and the fellow, Devers, until he was beyond accurate short gun range. Then he moved up beside Halleck.

"What's the matter, Ollie? You been with the Running H a long time, to quit like this."

Halleck mopped the sweat from his face. "Been with it too damned long. Should have left when Lafe Henderling began to slip. I want no part of Roan Gentry or his cussed ranch. All I want is to get out of here."

Hugh said, "A big surprise to a lot of us, finding that Gentry owned the Running H. How did he ever scrape up enough cash to buy Lafe Henderling out?"

"Didn't need cash. All Gentry had to have was that stud poker game of his."

Hugh was honestly startled. "What's that? You mean to tell me that Gentry won the layout from Henderling in a stud poker game?"

"Not all at once. Not in any one game. But little by little. Started months ago. A two-bit limit game in the bunkhouse. Lafe Henderling dropped in that night and took a hand. Gentry was hot. Finally we all dropped out except him and Lafe. It kind of burned Lafe some, the way his luck was running. He suggested they kick the limit. Gentry agreed. They ended up playing all night. Before they got through the limit had jumped to ten, twenty dollars. Ended up with Gentry close to $500 winner.

"Next night Lafe was back for more and took another licking. Lafe was a good guy in lots of ways, but he could be bullheaded as sin. What he'd lost in money by then didn't mean too much to him. It was just the idea that Gentry kept outplaying him. And Lafe couldn't stand that. Well, it kept getting worse and worse. By this time Gentry had enough of Lafe's money to make it a no-limit game, which they did. And Lafe began to lose his shirt. One game ran two nights and a day at one sitting. It got that serious, I tried to talk to Lafe. He told me to go wind my tail. First thing you know Lafe was out of ready cash. He began signing I.O.U.'s. He began hitting the bottle. Which made it all the easier for Gentry. Me, I knew Lafe had lost an awful lot, but never dreamed it was as bad as it turned out to be. Then one day, we found out. Gentry had the Running H and Lafe Henderling had nothing left but the whiskey bottle. Like you know, he made one last session of it with that bottle, then blew his brains out."

They were at the forks of the trail now. Ollie Halleck kept looking back toward Running H headquarters, nervous and strained. He said jerkily, "I'll be drifting. Thanks, Hugh, thanks a lot. And keep your eye on Gentry, Hugh—keep your eye on him! He's no damn good!"

And then Ollie Halleck was spurring off toward Lake City.

HUGH LOGAN met that rush beef herd for the reservation just coming across Hat Creek. The cut in the fence was still open. Four Tomahawk men were with the herd and all carried naked Winchesters across their saddle bows. Ed Loomis was in charge and he pulled over from point to talk with Hugh while the cattle filed past.

"I'd hoped to get away a little earlier, Hugh, he said. "But it was one of those days when the cattle were scattered, and the gather took longer than I expected. We'll push them right along, now."

Hugh nodded. "It's okay, Ed. I talked to Bill Barclay. He said any time in the next couple of days will be all right. So, don't push them too hard. And Ed, should you see any little thing along the drive that don't look quite regular, shoot first and ask about it later. That's the sort of thing we're up against, just that sort of thing. Going through the Serpentines, send a flank man out on either side and some distance ahead. And tell the boys what I just told you. Shoot at the first sign

of something shady, and don't waste your lead. Good luck!"

When the herd had gone on, Hugh brought out a wire cutter from his saddle bags and went to work. Before he was done, every wire in the fence was cut between every tree used as a post, from the lake to Hat Canyon. When done, he murmured, "There's your damn fence, Mister Roan Gentry! You build another, it gets the same treatment. You want a fight, you can have it."

The weariness which had his horse sagging, was now beginning to weigh him down, but not to such an extent that he could not mark the deep, shimmering beauty of the placid lake waters, nor the slumberous maroon and umber and ochre coloring of Cherokee Rim, way out there on his left, nor the rolling, rich acres of grass which spread from lake to rim, green along the lake, tawny along the higher slopes.

Here was a cattle empire of which men dreamed, and he, Hugh Logan, was its guardian and the guide of its future destiny. Neither of these responsibilities, he vowed, would find him wanting, come what might.

He splashed across Silver Creek, rode on to the corrals. Tied at the corral was the claybank bronc Bart Delage generally rode. And when he turned away from the corrals to head for the bunkhouse, he saw Bart sitting up on the ranchhouse porch with Lynn. Lynn stood up and beckoned him.

"How's Smiley?" he asked as he came up.

"Doing fine," answered Lynn. "Insisted on being moved down to the bunkhouse. You've taken care of—Jug?"

Hugh nodded. He let his long body down on the top step, dropped his hat beside him, scrubbed his hands through his hair. "How much fight do you think you can stand, Lynn?"

"Why? What do you mean, Hugh?"

Logan built a cigarette. "You been insisting you're a grown-up lady," he drawled. "And as you say, you are the owner of Tomahawk. So, in the end it is your say as to what we do and how we do it. We got a fight on our hands, a tough fight. I want you to realize that. More than Jug and Smiley are going to get hurt. What's your answer?"

"I—Bart and I were talking about that when you rode in, Hugh."

"Yeah," murmured Hugh. "And what did you decide?"

"That we'd better go slow."

"Lynn, you don't go slow with a wolf snapping at your heels. You turn and kill him, or he runs you down and tears you to pieces."

Bart Delage said, "The heaviest decision in the world to make is one that concerns the lives of good men. The price for anything can be too high."

Hugh looked over at him. "Some men," he said curtly "can take a slap in the face easier than others."

Bart Delage flushed. "Don't think you get what I mean, Hugh."

Lynn said, crisply tart, "You're tired, Hugh—and feeling mean. You better go get some sleep."

Hugh shrugged. "Maybe so." He got up and headed for the bunkhouse, hat swinging in his hand. Watching him, Lynn said to Delage, "He's that way, Bart—direct and crushing and fearless. Dad was like that. Elemental, without guile or deceit. Almost fanatically true to their ideals. Independent and extremely jealous of their rights. Scratch them unwarrantedly and you have a tiger on your hands. The breed of men who conquered the West, Bart."

Bart Delage nodded. "He'll go his own way, Lynn, regardless of what you say. And the men will follow him through hellfire, if necessary. He has that gift of leadership."

Smiley Rickart was in his bunk, sleeping. Logan softly pulled off his own boots, lowered himself on his own bunk, pulled a blanket over himself and was asleep as though hit with a club.

A little later, when Bart Delage had ridden away, Lynn Grayson came softly in, to feel Smiley's pulse and look for signs of unwarranted fever, as Doc Laverne had told her to. Satisfied that Smiley was doing all right, Lynn moved up and looked down at Logan.

Sleep had already softened the lines of his face, rubbed away the grimness about his mouth and jaw. His hair was tousled, unruly. He looked more boyish, less the mature, stern fighting man. A brooding light grew in Lynn's eyes, sober and measuring, then swiftly gentle. She laid soft fingers lightly against his face, a move almost a caress. Then she tiptoed out.

LAMPLIGHT spread soft gold through the bunkhouse when Hugh Logan awoke. There was a slight tinkle of dishes. He sat up to see Lynn Grayson spooning gruel from a bowl to Smiley Rickart's lips. Logan

threw aside his blanket, pulled on his boots. He went over and looked down at Smiley.

"Pretty soft, cowboy," he teased. "Pretty nurse and all that. How you feeling, kid?"

"Well enough to eat something stouter than soup," said Smiley. "But Lynn here says no. So I take what I can get. What do you know, Hugh?"

Logan sat on the foot of Smiley's bunk. "They run that 50 head of beef clear up past Glass Mountain. Joe Studinger trailed them that far. He was going to rest up some, take a fresh bronc and ride that trail still farther. He'll let us know what he finds. Also, I know how Roan Gentry got hold of the Running H." And he told of what Ollie Halleck had said. He did not add the final warning Halleck had given him.

"Where do we go from here?" Smiley asked.

"Few more things I got to know before I

can answer that one, Smiley. Some things a man has to be right sure of—so he'll have no regrets. When I'm sure, then we'll go. Wonder is there any more of that soup at the house? I'm hungry enough not to shy away from anything in the line of food."

Lynn said, "If you'll shave and comb your hair, I'll cook some supper for you."

Logan smiled. "Burbles, that's a bargain."

Later, while he was eating, Lynn said severely. "You owe Bart Delage an apology, Hugh. That was a pretty mean crack you made to him today. If you knew the truth, he's more generous than you are."

Logan made an impatient gesture. "I can't figure that guy. Why does he always argue against us defending Tomahawk interests?"

"You don't understand him, being more or less thickheaded," said Lynn tartly.

"Ouch!" Then he grinned. "If it'll make you feel better, then I'm apologizing. More of that good coffee?"

Lynn poured the coffee, then asked soberly, "Hugh, do you think Roan Gentry had anything to do with raiding our beef herd, and shooting down Smiley and Jug?"

That tough, concentrated look gathered about Logan's eyes. "If I had one guess, that would have to be it," he admitted. "But I'm not sure yet—and I got to be."

"And when you are?"

Logan rubbed a sinewy hand across the table, as though crushing something. "Like that!" he growled.

"But why would he want to do such a thing? Why should he want to start trouble with us?"

Logan shrugged. "Why will a wolf kill a dozen sheep when it can eat only part of one? Why will a weasel clean every roost in a hen house, and suck the blood of only one hen? Why do some men chase every dollar they see, pile up wealth, hoard it, then die with it doing them no good at all? Why do hate and envy drive some people to destroying the happiness, not only of others, but their own as well? Answer me all of those questions, Burbles, or any one of them, then maybe I can answer you. Must be the nature of the beast, that's all."

"Maybe if we let him get in on some of that reservation beef business, he'd be different?"

"No!" growled Logan. "If he'll raise beef as good as ours, Bill Barclay will be glad to give him some of that business. But there is no reason why we should deliberately let him have it. In this life a man has to be able to meet his opposition, or not whine at the results. Maybe that is one reason why Gentry has it in for us. Then again, Eden range is the sweetest cattle setup in a month of travel. For all we know, being the sort he is, maybe Gentry has ideas about some day getting his paws on it. He gobbled up one darn good ranch over a stud poker table. Maybe that's given him ideas of grandeur. He wouldn't be the first to lose his head and reach for stakes he couldn't handle. Only one thing is sure. He, or nobody else, gets anything away from Tomahawk without a fight. I'll attend to that."

Lynn eyed him gravely. "I'd hate to have you for an enemy, Hugh Logan."

That softened his face to a smile. "Now you are talking impossible things, Burbles." He pushed back his chair, building a cigarette. "Just to prove what a wicked enemy I am, I'll dry dishes for you."

He carried dishes to the sink at the rear of the kitchen, began scraping them. Then he stilled, staring out of the window above the sink. Lynn came over to him. "What is it? What do you see, Hugh?"

"Come on outside. We can see better."

They went out the back door, which faced toward Cherokee Rim. Logan pointed. Way back there beyond the Rim a red glow lit the sky. Steadily it brightened and grew. Lynn

pressed a little closer to Logan, dropping a hand on his arm.

"I'm an awful little coward," she admitted shakily. "Everything scares me these days, even a fire that is miles away. Where could it be, Hugh?"

"It's dead in line with Vinegar Flat," said Logan tersely. "It could be a cabin. It could be—Johnny McNulty's cabin. Lynn, I'm going up there. You didn't know it, but Johnny was shot at last week, shot at twice. Now, there's a fire burning, right where his cabin should be. I'm going up there!"

THE closest means of access to the country beyond Cherokee Rim from Tomahawk headquarters, was by way of Hat Creek Canyon. And, with the fence cut, Hugh Logan headed that way, slamming his fresh horse through at breakneck speed, pushing recklessly up the black treachery of the narrow, winding Hat Canyon trail. The night was cool and crisp, but Logan's horse was beginning to lather by the time it topped out and fled across the tableland beyond the Rim, where tarweed and cedars laid their pungent scent across the night.

By this time the fire had died down and all was dark ahead, but Logan knew his country pretty well and held a fair general line for Vinegar Flat. What little breeze there was stirring was in his face, and in time Logan caught the first acrid smell of smoke. This scent he followed, like a setter dog working out a covey, and as the smoke smell grew stronger and stronger, he knew he was right.

He broke through the scattered cedars into the open grassland of Vinegar Flat and sure enough, out there ahead lay a roughly square bed of coals, winking ruby red through the dark. They were all that remained of Johnny McNulty's cabin.

Logan, the old, cold fury working in him again, checked his first impulse to spur up to the spot. It was a fair guess that there might be men, lying in wait for just such a thing, gambling on it in fact. And should they catch him outlined against the glow of the coals, well—!

Logan reined in, every sense testing the night. Then, off to his left a low laugh sounded, and came Johhny McNulty's voice, "Wise old wolf like always. That's you, isn't it, Hugh?"

Logan swung toward him, his relief making him harsh. "Johnny! You sawed-off little hellion! Don't tell me you got careless and burned up your own cabin?"

"I'm not careless any more, Hugh," said Johnny. "Was I so, I'd be in those coals right now, well roasted. I'm hoping the hellions who burned me out are thinking I'm in there. I'm hoping they do figure that way. For their surprise will be all the harder to bear when I show up hale and hearty and shooting with both fists."

Hugh swung down beside his friend, built a smoke. "Tell me."

"I've turned fresh air fiend," said Johnny, "and well for me that I have. Got to thinking on my way home from town the other day, and the more I thought the more I figured it might be smart on my part to start sleeping back in the brush a while, what with some benighted spalpeen taking pot shots at me from here and there. And so I did, and tonight they came and lit the fire. They came in quiet, and the first I knew of anything wrong was a big rush of fire, crackling up. Oh, but they were devilish clever! They touched off two bits of fire. One in front of the door, the other under the window. They were out to coop me up and no mistake. But here I lay sleeping, over here in the brush.

"I glimpsed them devils riding away. There was three or four of them. And I was about to open up with the Winchester, when I thought better of it. I doubt I'd hit them, being dark and them riding fast. So I says to myself, 'Let 'em think they've roasted you, McNulty—let them think so. Come morning there'll be clear sign to follow, and at the end of that sign you'll find them in the clear daylight. And then you can do your shooting.' That is what McNulty said to himself, and that is the way it will be."

"You used your head, Sawed-Off," conceeded Hugh. "Did they run off your bronc?"

"Don't think so. The corral stands well back from the cabin, and just before you came I thought I heard the poor beastie snorting its fright. We'll wait a bit and take a look. So the glow of the old cabin reached clear beyond the Rim, did it?"

"It did. Just a chance that I happened to see it. Damn it, Johnny, why should anyone want to burn you out?"

Johnny's low laugh sounded again. "It may be that the angels are angry with McNulty for his sinful ways. I count the loss of the cabin little. It was old before I got it. Come a brighter day I'll build me another."

THEY squatted on their heels, watching, listening, conversing in low tones, while the coals which marked the former cabin site faded and shrank. Here and there a coyote mourned at the stars, and once, way back in the cedars, the deeper, hoarser note of a lobo wolf carried through the night. After a time they went over to the corral and found Johnny's horse safe, his saddle straddling the corral rail.

"Thoughtful of the devils," murmured Johnny humorously. "'Twill save me blistering my feet."

"They didn't mean it that way," said Hugh. "It was to look as if you'd been caught in your cabin by a fire starting by accident. Had they taken your horse and riding rig, that would have indicated otherwise. They're still trying to cover their tracks."

They waited the long, chill night hours out, talking, smoking, dozing now and then. Hugh gave Johnny the story of all that had happened since they last were together and Johnny observed shrewdly, "I can make some halfway sane guesses now as to why McNulty's hide has been scalded, here and there. In my small way I make some part of a big picture."

In the gray dawn they were on the move, and Johnny picked up the sign of the night raiders. It headed straight east, away from the Rim, back into the wilderness of cedars, where the air hung moist and heavy with their pungent fragrance. The sun came up and looked them in the eye, and still the sign led on, but now beginning to swing toward the north.

"If it keeps on this way," said Johnny, it will take us clear up around the head of Hat Canyon. Well, if it leads to the gates of the devil's own dugout, McNulty will be following it."

The cedars grew thicker and taller and merged into scrub-pine timber, and this in turn became thicker and larger until they were riding the still and shadowy aisles of a virgin forest. The way began sloping upward, and Hugh said, "We're on the flank of the Yola Bolas, Johnny."

The sign led into a trail, well traveled, which wound off to their right. Hugh said, "To ride this trail openly is asking for a rifle slug, right down our throats. We'll keep it between us, Johnny. You right, me left. Keep your eyes open."

They stole on through the timber, paralleling the trail, rifles balanced across their saddle bows, ready for instant action. And so they topped a long, timber-covered ridge which slanted out to the southeast, a ridge which on its far side dropped steeply into a roughly circular basin, where the timber thinned out to a small clearing, in which a couple of cabins stood.

Sounds came up. The clack of an ax against wood. The voices of men. The bellow of cattle. Hugh crossed the trail swiftly to intercept Johnny. "We've found something, fella."

"Ay, but what?"

"I'm going down and find out."

"Now then, whose cabin was it that was burned last night? argued Johnny. "'Tis McNulty who should be moving in to gather himself a scalp."

"That part can come later," said Hugh. "Right now there are things to be found out. And I know what I'm looking for."

Even as he spoke Hugh was getting out of the saddle, stripping off his chaps and spurs, which he hung to his saddle horn. "Move back into the timber a ways with the horses, Johnny, and wait for me. I won't be any longer than I have to."

Without giving Johnny time to argue further, Logan stole away, rifle in hand. He went well down the crest of that slanting ridge until east of the basin. Then he began dropping down the far slope. He moved with swift care, just a flitting shadow in the timber gloom, sliding from tree to tree. In time the slope gave off to comparative level, where the timber grew huge and stately and brooding. From here Logan began cutting back toward the basin clearing.

But he did not go far, for out ahead of him there was movement in the timber. In some distant past, one of the forest giants, stricken by lightning, or wracked beyond endurance by some savage storm, had crashed and died, to lie there mouldering. Behind the shelter of it, Hugh Logan flattened down and waited.

THE movement came nearer, resolving into some dozen white-faced cattle, driven leisurely by a single rider. They passed some 20 yards away, heading east, and Logan, peering through the gray and musty limbs of the fallen tree, quivered like a spirited horse struck with a whip.

When all sound of rider and cattle was gone, Logan went back the way he had come, climbing to the ridge top, following it up to where Johnny McNulty waited with the horses. "Not gone long, but by the look in his eye, he's seen things," observed Johnny. "What is it, or would you have McNulty stand here chewing his nails?"

Hugh was donning chaps and spurs. Now he hunkered down, digging a hand into the heavy mat of mould under the timber, clearing it until he had reached and smoothed a space of dark earth. With a match he began drawing lines. "Look at this, Johnny. First, a Tomahawk. Now watch!" He connected some more lines to the outline of the Tomahawk brand. "What does that give us?"

Johnny studied a moment. "Hen Coop," he said.

"Exactly! But mark the cunning of it all. Look at this. Running H. And now—?" Hugh scratched some more lines.

Johnny whistled softly. "Hen Coop again! Cunning is right."

"You're still blind. Watch this. Your own iron, J M Connected!"

"Hen Coop, three times. Did I say cunning? That's genius."

Hugh Logan straightened up. "I saw cows down there, Johnny. They were part of that beef herd that was run off in the Serpentines. The Tomahawk iron on them was fresh blotted to Hen Coop. There were a couple of Running H cows with them, fresh blotted to Hen Coop. And the rider driving them was Fat Purdy, of the Running H. Oh, I'm getting the picture now. I'm getting it. To make it complete he'll have to register his new iron—he'll have to register the Hen Coop."

"Him? Meaning Roan Gentry, of course?"

"Nobody else but, Johnny. Look! Gentry registers his new iron, the Hen Coop. His young stuff, as yet without brand, he irons a clean Hen Coop. Some Running H he blots to Hen Coop. Some he vents to that. Mixed in with them are Tomahawk cows, blotted to Hen Coop. And your own J M Connected, blotted the same way. He throws everything into one herd, weathers it a season, back here in this wild country. Then he ships, and who can prove what? You got to go to the inside of a hide to prove a well weathered blot. You pick a critter, kill and skin it, and find you got one packing a clean, original Hen Coop brand. That leaves you way out on a limb. You can't kill and skin every critter in a herd to prove a blotting job. No court would back you that far. The man is smarter than I give him credit for, although I hate to admit it."

Johnny nodded sagely. "I saw something myself, whilst waiting for you, Hugh. It was Punch Goettling, riding in, heading down into yon basin. As if we needed any more proof that this is Gentry's doings. Well, what do we do?"

"You're going down to Tomahawk headquarters, lay low and keep out of sight for a time. I'm going to Mountain View. You can tell Lynn that, so she'll know what's keeping me."

Johnny nodded. "I see. It would be at Mountain View that Gentry would register his Hen Coop brand."

"That's right. I want to see that brand on register. It is at once Gentry's strong, and weak point. He has to register it to make his grand scheme work. Yet, once we put the proper proof on him, it's the point that can swing him on a rope. Once I see that brand on register, I put the whole picture in front of Joe Studinger. And Joe can move in and make his arrest. For a time it was in my mind not to bother about law. But I can see that Lynn would rather I did bring in the law. Besides, Joe Studinger is a good guy and it will be the proper break for him. Now, let's get out of here!"

IT WAS dark when Hugh Logan rode into Mountain View. Had he gone in by regular stage road, via Benson's, it would have been after midnight before he got to Mountain View. But he had ridden directly southwest from Lake City, crossing the barren, heat-razed wastes of the lower end of the Serpentines, and so had saved time and distance. Even so his horse was gaunt and jaded and the devils of weariness were pulling at his own toughened muscles.

Hugh put his horse up at the livery barn, ordered it well grained, then sought food himself, after which he ran down the county clerk, found him at home and made his request. "It's after hours and your office is closed, I know,"

said Hugh. "But I'd deem it a big favor if I could get a look at your brand register."

The county clerk noted the gaunt, fatigued lines of Logan's face and said, "Of course. Come along."

Under lamplight Logan scanned the register, found what he was looking for, noted the date of registry. "Thanks," he said, "Thanks a heap. Do you a favor sometime."

Back in the street, Logan was all impatience to head back for Lake City. Now he knew. Now he had all the weapons he needed for attack. Now he could lay the facts in front of Joe Studinger and Joe could move in. And that, he knew, would suit Lynn Grayson best.

But he couldn't leave right away. He had to give his horse a chance. And for all practical purposes there was no need of too much hurry. Down at the livery barn, probably, they'd let him catch a wink or two of sleep in the hay loft, and then he'd be up and going by dawn tomorrow, on a horse well rested and fed. So he headed again for the livery barn.

Mountain View was a bigger town than Lake City. More people were in it, more moving about. There were a number of saloons and gambling joints. Light flares stabbed out into the street from door and window, and of a sudden, in one of them, Hugh saw a figure standing which was vaguely familiar. The man turned, and Logan recognized him. It was Ollie Halleck, late of the Running H.

Halleck had plainly been making the rounds of the bars. He was standing too straight and dignified to be normal. Hugh murmured to himself, "Ollie knows more than he told me. He quit the Running H because he knew things were going on that he didn't want to be mixed up in. Punch Goettling wasn't going to let Ollie quit, knowing that Ollie was wise to things they wanted to cover up. It might help a lot if I got Ollie to go back to Lake City with me and tell what he knows to Joe Studinger. Maybe I can persuade him."

Logan headed for the rider, just as Halleck, his fuzzy brain finally set on a new destination, started up the street. Logan speeded up his own pace, drawing closer. Halleck moved into shadow, then out into another beam of light. And as he did so, a voice cut coldly from a neighboring pocket of blackness. "Oh, Halleck! This way. Over here, Halleck!"

Despite the liquor in him, that voice reached Ollie Halleck, did things to him. It brought him jerking around, suddenly shambling and fearful. And his words, shot through with a sudden terror, rose high and shrill. "Devers! No, man—no—!"

Gunfire bloomed in the dark and a single shot rolled its rumbling echo down the street. Ollie Halleck sagged, his knees buckling. Then he caved in the middle and fell forward.

Sound of the shot brought men running from all sides. Hugh Logan, sped right past Ollie Halleck's sprawled figure and on into that dark pocket, to find himself in the mouth of an alleyway. He went down the alley, drawn gun poised and ready. But nothing showed in the alley, and when Logan broke into the clear beyond, there was nothing but the mocking echo of racing hoofs, fading into the night. The killer had made his getaway.

Logan did not go back to the street. There was no use. He'd seen dead men fold up before. There was nothing he could do for Ollie Halleck. There was nothing any man could do. So Logan circled the edge of town, coming up to the livery barn. He was remembering the name Halleck had called, just before he died. Devers. That was what it was. Devers. And that had been the name of that hardfaced, strange rider who had been with Punch Goettling at the Running H the day Ollie Halleck had quit. Now, here in Mountain View, Ollie Halleck lay dead, at the hands of Devers. The Running H hadn't let Ollie Halleck quit, after all.

THE morning stars were still cold in the sky when Hugh Logan rode out of Mountain View. It was noon when he racked into Lake City, grey with trail dust. And here he met up with Ed Loomis and the other three Tomahawk riders who had taken that second beef herd out to the reservation. They were on their way home. Hugh was relieved to see them.

"Everything went slick as grease, Hugh," reported Loomis. "Here's Bill Barclay's receipt. He said he'd voucher the bill through right away and that the check would show up in the mail, same as usual."

The riders headed out for home, while Logan went over to Joe Studinger's office. Joe wasn't in, so Logan went into the Two Star and asked for Joe there. Sam Tabor told him that Joe had left town two days ago and hadn't shown up since, that he'd left no word

as to when he'd be back. Hugh nodded and bought a drink.

Sam Tabor said, pouring, "You look kind of drawn out, Hugh. Any dope yet on who it was that gunned Jug Malone and Smiley, and got away with your beef herd?"

Hugh shrugged. "Working on that is what's keeping Joe away, probably."

Hugh went back to the sheriff's office and left a note on Studinger's old desk, telling him to get in touch as soon as he got back. After which, Hugh headed for Tomahawk.

The fence along Hat Creek was still open, a fact Hugh noted with only passing interest. Fences were a small part of the setup, now.

At headquarters Hugh unsaddled, turned his bronc into the feed corral and tramped wearily over to the bunkhouse. He was surprised to find Smiley Rickart sitting up, playing casino with Johnny McNulty. Johnny said, "If it ain't the wandering son himself! Now what did you find when you rode over the hill?"

"What I went looking for," said Hugh meaningly.

"Ah!" mumured Johnny. "And now?"

"Waiting to get in touch with Joe Studinger. Joe wasn't in town when I came through. And while waiting, I'm going to make a human being of myself again."

He carried a change of clothes over to the bathhouse behind the cook shack, robbed the cook of all the hot water he had, had a soaking bath. He dressed, shaved and went over to the ranchhouse, where he found Lynn busy over a bit of sewing. She looked at him gravely.

"If you don't quit riding all over half the earth, you're going to make me old and wrinkled before my time, Hugh Logan. Where on earth you been now? You worry me to death."

"Been several places, Burbles. And I got a lot of things to tell you. Not pretty things, either. That's your punishment for insisting that you're grown up. Hang on to your saddle. There are some tough jumps coming."

And then he told her, told her everything. Told of what he and Johnny McNulty had found, way over east of the Yola Bolas, told of the blotted brands he had seen, told of his trip to Mountain View, that he'd seen Roan Gentry's Hen Coop brand on the official brand register, and of all the implications behind that fact. He told the story of Ollie Halleck, how Halleck had quit the Running H, and how Gentry's vengeance had followed him there, closing Halleck's mouth for all time on what he might have told.

"So, Burbles," he ended, "that's what we are up against. That's the kind of mad wolf that's running loose in these parts. He's already shown that he intends to stop at nothing. In the long run, it's Gentry, or us. His burning out Johnny McNulty was for two reasons. One, to have free hand with Johnny's cows, the other, to keep Johnny from riding that high range beyond Cherokee Rim, where Johnny might stumble across too much which Gentry wants to keep secret. But Johnny's herd is small stuff. The fat herd is our herd. That's what Gentry has his eye on—and our range. Yeah, it's him or us. And now you know everything."

Lynn was a little pale, her eyes very big and solemn. She said, "And what do you intend to do, Hugh?"

He said, "I've cooled off a little. I"m going to let Joe Studinger and the law handle it."

Lynn looked at him, her eyes warming. "You knew that was the way I'd like it to be, didn't you."

"Yes. I figured you'd rather it be that way."

She said, looking down at the sewing in her lap. "At times like this I like you a lot, Hugh. This will please Bart, too."

Logan studied her so intently that color welled into her face. "Don't grow up too fast, Burbles," he said gravely. He stood up, yawned. "All I do is ride and sleep these days, seems like. For the past 48 hours it's been mostly ride. I think I'll go catch up on the sleep."

THE sun was shining when Logan awoke the next morning. He felt like a new man. The hard tension had left him. He felt supple and smooth and relaxed. When he went over to the cookshack to try and wrangle a late breakfast out of the cook, he saw Bart Delage's claybank standing ground-reined in front of the ranchhouse.

He had finished breakfast and was leaving the cookshack when he heard running hoofs, and looked over to see a rider pull up at the ranchhouse porch. It was the roustabout from the livery barn in Lake City. Logan hurried over to him. "What is it, Jerry?"

The roustabout handed him a folded note. "Sam Tabor asked me to bring it out to you, Hugh."

"Thanks, Jerry. Had breakfast?"

The roustabout, just a kid, grinned and nodded. "I get on the job earlier than you do."

Logan chuckled. "Stay with it, Jerry. You'll own that livery layout one of these days."

The roustabout rode off. Logan unfolded the note and read. He went very still and read again. Each word seemed to jump at him like a projectile.

> Hugh:
> A prospector just came in from out Glass Mountain way. He says he found a dead man out there, wearing a star. From this and other description it must be Joe Studinger. Doc Laverne and a couple of the boys are going back out there with the prospector. You were in asking for Joe yesterday. Knew you'd want to hear about this.
>
> Sam Tabor.

It seemed to Hugh Logan that he was existing in a vacuum, where all was roaring chaos, through which finally cut the voice of Lynn Grayson, calling to him. Hugh swung his head, almost stupidly, to see her standing on the porch steps with Bart Delage. She called again. "Hugh, what is it?"

He went over, walking like a man in a daze, handing her the note. As she read he heard her catch her breath, then cry out softly. "Hugh, it can't be—it couldn't be—Joe Studinger. They wouldn't dare!"

Logan shook his head, as though to clear his thoughts. Then he said, a savage, rising note in his voice, "It's Joe, all right. And that leaves it up to us. Do you understand, Lynn? Up to us!"

Bart Delage read the note, then said slowly, "I've never believed in violence between one outfit and another. I've felt that differences between men should be settled by law. But this! Hugh, I've three riders, good men all. With me, that makes four. We're riding with you in this thing, seeing it through, come what may."

Nothing could have jerked Hugh Logan back to clarity of thought and action as did this quiet-voiced statement by Bart Delage, because it was so unexpected. Hugh stared at him. Then he said, "I been wrong about you, Bart. For things I've thought and things I've said, I apologize. Me and the boys will be proud to have you with us."

Bart said, "I'll go get my boys."

He ran to his horse and spurred away. Hugh looked back at Lynn. She was very pale, biting her lips. "Well?" he said, almost roughly.

She looked at him with strange intensity. Then her head straightened. "You are right, Hugh. It is up to us!"

THEY rode away from Tomahawk headquarters at twilight. There were five Tomahawk men, including Hugh Logan. There was Bart Delage and his three men. Finally, there was Johnny McNulty. Ten of them in all. Smiley Rickart had begged to be taken along.

"I can ride a horse, Hugh," he pleaded. "I can shoot a gun. I got to get in a lick for Jug Malone, and now for Joe Studinger. I got to! I'll go loco, waiting around here."

Hugh shook a grim head. "This can develop into awful rough stuff, Smiley. It'll be no place for a man with wounds just starting to heal. The mind and heart may be willing, but the flesh would be weak. Yet, you won't be entirely useless, cowboy. Roan Gentry is playing poker again—all or nothing. He ain't the sort to do it with his eyes shut. He's as savage as a wolf, and just as cunning. He's liable to be figuring we'll take the trail against him and then be set to hit where he ain't looking. Maybe, right at headquarters, here. Right at Lynn. So you take your Winchester and you sit around. You tell Cooky to break out that old Sharps buffalo gun of his. And the pair of you stand watches. All day and all night, somebody has to be awake and watching around here. Yeah, you got your chore to do."

So that was the way it was. Only, just before they left, Hugh went up to the ranchhouse and faced Lynn. "You stay right here at headquarters until we get back, Burbles. No riding anywhere. Smiley and Cooky will be keeping watch."

She was clasping and unclasping her hands nervously. He caught her by the elbows, shook her gently. "Chin up, Burbles."

"I'm not afraid, for myself," she stammered. "You should know that. The boys—you—! Oh, be careful, Hugh; be careful!"

She watched him go out the door. Chapped and spurred, big guns swinging at his hips, he loomed grim and implacable. And this trail he was about to ride—there could be no faltering, no turning back. And there would be none. This she knew. When he was gone she put her face in her hands and sobbed. "Hugh! My dear—my dear!"

In the first velvet dark they climbed the Hat Canyon trail, filed out into the cedar

country beyond Cherokee Rim. Johnny McNulty, knowing this country better than any of the others, took the lead. They rode in silence. The only sounds were the clack of hoofs on an occasional rock, the creak of riding gear.

They rode far back into the cedars, and they circled north around the head of Hat Canyon. They left cedar country and hit big timber and felt the east slope of the Yola Bolas under them. It was well past midnight when Johnny McNulty drew a halt.

"We ain't far away now, Hugh. We can do nothing in this dark. And there is always the chance that we bump into a guard and give everything away. We should stay here until dawn."

"We'll wait here until dawn," nodded Hugh.

They got down, loosened their cinches and waited the hours out. When the first dim grayness of dawn began to filter through the timber, they stirred their stiffened limbs and made ready. Said Johnny McNulty, "That ridge that slants down this side the basin should be out there maybe half a mile."

They rode on, silent, each man with his thoughts. Johnny McNulty was right. They met the ridge and breasted its slope and reached the top. Daylight was stronger, now. Down below, the dim shapes of the cabins showed, and smoke was curling from the rusty chimneys. A cow bellowed restlessly.

Hugh Logan said, "This is it, boys. Nobody likes this sort of thing. But we didn't ask for this. Roan Gentry has been shoving it right down our throats. Keep remembering Jug Malone and Joe Studinger. Spread out downridge about 30 yards apart. Load your Winchesters full up. We'll work those cabins over with a full magazine apiece. Then we go in. All set?"

Loading gates clicked softly as men made sure their weapons were loaded to capacity. They filed down the ridge, took station. Hugh Logan lifted his rifle, pulled down on a cabin and let drive. The report split the silence like a thunder peal. Then the echoes were rolling and crashing in one long tumult.

LOGAN swung his rifle lever methodically, counting his shots. Half for one cabin, half for the other. Down there in the cabins, men were yelling their alarm, but the sound could not carry up to those riflemen on the ridge. A man came plunging from one of the cabins, disheveled and stupified with surprise. He took less than half a dozen steps before he reeled and fell.

Logan's gun clicked empty, and as he reached for more shells, the riflefire along the ridge ran out and stopped. Logan lifted his voice in a deep shout. "Go on in, boys!"

Down the slope they raced, horses full out, wild with excitement. Logan jammed shells into his rifle as he sped. As they lost the advantage of elevation above the basin, they lost view momentarily of the cabins. But soon they were at the edge of the clearing, then breaking out into it.

A man stood in the doorway of a cabin, rifle steadied against the door post. His weapon lanced pale flame, and from the corner of his eye Hugh Logan saw a horse go down, throwing its rider headlong. Logan flung shot after shot at that renegade in the cabin door. The fellow was pulling down for another shot. Then his weapon fell from his hands, he spun around and disappeared.

The charge rolled right up to the cabins and men left their saddles in spinning leaps. Logan dropped his rifle, drew both belt guns, plunged through an open door. A gun seemed to explode right in his face, the breath of it hot and acrid. The flare blinded him momentarily, but he hammered shot after shot at the flare, above it, below it, to either side. Johnny McNulty, crowding in behind Logan, yelled, "That does it, Hugh! That just does it!"

Silence came down, shocked and shuddering. Logan scrubbed a hand across his eyes, to rid himself of the dazzle of that gun flare. Johnny McNulty said, "Two of them in here, Hugh. The one you just downed, and another by the door."

They went back outside and saw Ed Loomis come out of the other cabin, prodding his guns against the backs of two men who moved with their hands in the air. One of those two was Punch Goettling. Hugh and Johnny went over there. Ed Loomis said, "There were three in this shanty, Hugh. One we must have downed when we first opened up with the rifles. There was no fight left in these two."

"Six in all," said Hugh grimly. "That first one who ran out into the open. Two more in that cabin, three in this. Bart, take a couple of the boys and drift down around the corral and see how things look there." Hugh looked around, "Our own gang? I saw a horse go down."

"Mine," said Ed Loomis. "Thought I was

going to break my neck, but didn't. We came off lucky."

Hugh looked at the two prisoners. They looked dazed, stunned. Of Punch Goettling, Hugh asked harshly, "Where's Gentry?"

Goettling shrugged. "Not here. You gone crazy, Logan? What's the idea, you coming in on us this way, shooting good men down?"

Hugh shrugged wearily. "Don't try and bluff, Goettling. You're fooling nobody. I been here before and saw what's been going on here. Then there is Jug Malone and Joe Studinger. And I was over in Mountain View when your friend Devers caught up with Ollie Halleck. No, you're not fooling anybody."

PUNCH GOETTLING blinked, a sullen mask settling over his face. The other prisoner was a stranger to Logan, a thin-lipped, hardfaced renegade.

Bart Delage came back. He said, "Nothing in the corral at all, Hugh, except half a dozen running irons hung on the fence and the dead ashes of a branding fire and a lot of these scattered around." He tossed down several bits of hair and gristle, the cuttings of ear marked cattle. "What ear markings were registered with that Hen Coop brand?"

"Under slope, right and left," said Logan. "Which takes out the Tomahawk ear mark of swallow fork, right and left, perfectly." He turned to the prisoners again. "Got anything to say?" he demanded curtly.

Reading what he saw in Logan's glance, Punch Goettling licked his lips. The other prisoner, stonyfaced, stared straight ahead. Hugh looked at Bart Delage. "Well, Bart?"

Delage said slowly, "When we started I said we were with you, all the way. That stands."

Hugh said, "Good! One of you boys get two of their horses—no, make it three. Ed Loomis lost his. He'll need another. Ed, you keep an eye on these two. Rest of you come with me."

"Going to burn, Hugh?" asked Johnny McNulty.

"No. I got nothing against these fine trees. This will do just as well."

Hugh went into his saddle, unstrapped his riata. He ran a small loop, rode up beside one of the cabins, hooked the loop over the end of a protuding joist. He ran out the rope, threw a dally about his saddle horn and spurred his mount into the pull.

The others got the idea immediately. Half a dozen ropes were hooked on to the doomed cabin, half a dozen ropes twanged taut and half a dozen stout cow ponies laid their weight into the pull. The cabin creaked and shuddered and protested with squeaks and groans. The horses dug in harder, haunches bunched and driving. The cabin swayed, tottered, then came all apart in splintering, crashing ruin.

"Now the other," said Hugh.

With both cabins demolished, they turned to the corral, wrecking it. Then Hugh caught Ed Loomis' eye and jerked his head toward a gnarled tan oak tree, standing among the conifers. Ed Loomis headed his prisoners that way and said, "March!"

They brought up two horses and two ropes. They tied the prisoner's hands, ran the ropes over a handy limb, dropped nooses about the prisoner's necks, then boosted them astride the horses. The ropes were drawn taut, the free ends tied about the tree trunk. In his saddle, Hugh Logan faced the prisoners. His face was a bleak, inscrutable mask, his eyes cold. He said, "For a long time, now, Tomahawk has lived at peace with all its neighbors. We bothered no one, asked only the same in return. We never had any trouble with Lafe Henderling and the Running H. Then Roan Gentry got his hooks into Henderling, drove him to ruin and suicide. Next Gentry fenced along Hat Creek, his opening move against Tomahawk, apparently a bluff, just to see, I suspect, if we were as peaceful as we seemed, and if we'd back down. Then he set some of his crowd to smoke down Jug Malone and Smiley Rickart and run off that reservation beef herd we were taking out. It happened in the Serpentines. They killed Jug, shot up Smiley some. They took the cattle back past Glass Mountain, brought them clear around the Yola Bolas to this basin, to change the ear markings and blot our Tomahawk brand to a Hen Coop, a brand which Gentry had already registered at Mountain View. I know this happened, because a couple of days ago I was in this basin, hid out, and saw Tomahawk cattle, with brands so blotted.

"The other night Johnny McNulty was burned out. He'd been shot at from cover, before that. Gentry wanted Johnny's cows, his J M Connected also easy to blot to Hen Coop. And while Johnny was holding forth at Vinegar Flat, he was a little too close to this spot. Gentry was afraid Johnny might stumble across things Gentry didn't want known. So, he was set to rub Johnny out.

"There there was Joe Studinger. His body was found out by Glass Mountain, where he was working out the trail of that rustled beef herd of ours. So—this!" Hugh indicated the ropes, the tree. "All this I've said, just to show you we know what the score is. When you run with the wolf pack, you're damned by your howl."

The hardfaced renegade spat. "Hell with the sermon! Get it over with!"

Hugh reined around behind the two horses, swung his coiled riata right and left against the haunches of the mounts. The animals snorted, plunged ahead. The limb of the tan oak creaked at the weight so suddenly transferred to it.

Hugh Logan reined away and said tonelessly. "We'll get along home, boys."

HUGH Logan left the others at Hat Creek and headed for Lake City. His first stop was at Doc Laverne's office. "About Joe Studinger, Doc?" he asked.

"The prospector was telling the truth, Hugh," answered Doc. "It was Joe, all right. Only one consolation. Joe never knew what hit him. Rifle slug."

Hugh nodded somberly. "They knew somebody would be working out the trail of those rustled cows, and they left a hideout man to take care of anybody who came prowling. I shouldn't have let Joe go it alone. I shouldn't have."

Doc said curtly, "Had you been with him there'd been two of you down, probably. Don't go to feeling that way, Hugh. It was Joe's chore before it was yours, anyway."

Hugh said grimly, "Gentry has an awful lot to answer for. I can't rest until I come up with that hombre. I can't rest."

"You're sure it is Gentry and his crowd?" Doc asked.

"I'm sure," nodded Hugh simply.

"Then you'll come up with him. Gentry is the kind to force his bets, once he starts, once you've hurt him."

"I've hurt him," said Hugh significantly.

Logan went over to the Two Star and thanked Sam Tabor for sending out the note about the finding of Joe Studinger's body. Sam Tabor said, "Joe was a good man, Hugh. He was white, he was square. He'd grown a little old, carrying that star. But he did his duty as he saw it, and he saw it clear. We'll miss him. I will, especially, for he was an old and mighty good friend of mine. Is it Gentry, Hugh?"

"It's Gentry."

Sam Tabor brought out bottle and glasses, poured the drinks. "To his destruction, Hugh," he said, lifting his glass. "Anything I can do at any time—and I mean anything, Hugh—why, just holler."

Logan made the rounds of the town, taking a look in everywhere that he might run across a Gentry rider. But he found none anywhere and when he read the brands of every pony along Butte Street, he found none that he could connect with Gentry. Then he headed homeward.

For the first time he noticed a change in the feel of the day. Sunlight wasn't so bright as usual, and looking about he saw that a gray haze was beginning to spread across the sky. Up around the Yola Bola Peaks that haze was cloud, gathering and packing thicker and thicker. A wind was beginning to sweep down from the peaks, and there was a chill, wet feel to it. Storm was in the air.

Crossing Hat Creek and jogging down the lakeshore trail he saw that the blue of the lake was graying, with a cold look to it, that whitecaps were beginning to whip up. Tules leaned before the wind, gave off a rustling sigh. A wisp of killdeer plover drifted overhead, and their cry was plaintive and lonely. The first drops of rain began to fall as Logan drew up at the home corral.

Hugh nodded approvingly as he saw that Ed Loomis and the other boys were busy, readying things about the place for the storm. Johnny McNulty was helping them make things secure.

Smiley Rickart, in the bunkhouse, said, "Not a thing doing around here, Hugh. But the boys tell me you really caved in some of Gentry's ribs."

Hugh nodded wearily, sat on his bunk and rolled a smoke. "Lynn know what happened yet, Smiley?"

"I don't think so. Bart Delage and his boys kept right on traveling for home by way of the swamp trail. And none of our boys been up to the house."

"That's good," said Hugh. "No sense heaping things on her head, ugly things, things which even a rough man doesn't like to remember. Only thing is, he can't help himself, sometimes."

The rain was a downpour now, and the other boys came in. Ed Loomis built a fire in the bunkhouse stove. "Wild night ahead," he said briefly.

A FLASH of greenish-yellow light flared across the darkening sky, and a moment later thunder broke with a crash up in the peaks, then rattled and grumbled its way all along Cherokee Rim, finally dying in the distance. But almost immediately there was another flare of lightning and another burst of thunder.

"Going to be a dinger up along the rim," said Johnny McNulty. "That old rim seems to call to lightning and thunder like a magnet does to steel. I mind one day last year I was up there, and the air was so full of electricity there were little balls of green fire on the tips of my bronc's ears. My own hair was creeping with it and everything you touched seemed to snap and sparkle. And sure," he added with a grin, "I was half expecting the devil himself to come jumping out from behind some cedar bush to chase me with his spear."

"In which case," grinned Smiley, "you'd have run your bronc right off the rim, I bet, Johnny."

"Hah!" said Johnny, his eyes twinkling. "Never was there a bronc foaled, that would be fast enough for McNulty in such case. No, indeedy! For about then McNulty would have growed wings and flown like the angels."

"The cattle bunch up under the rim during a storm," said Ed Loomis. "Funny the lightning never hits them."

"No trees there," said Johnny. "'Tis a tree that brings the lightning down, Ed."

Hugh Logan let his glance play over the men, expanding under the warmth of the stove, contented with stout shelter while the storm grew outside. Their thoughts seemed clear and at ease. What had happened back there in that basin under the Yola Bolas had left no scar on them, at least none that could be seen. Restless, Logan donned a slicker and went up to the ranchhouse; there, in a little corner room which served as an office, to try and clear his thoughts by doing a little paper work. So dark had the storm made the outside world, he had to light a lamp.

He sat there, his big shoulders humped over the desk, his sinewy, work toughened hands fumbling a little with pencil and paper as he worked on some tally sheets. The door behind him opened, and Lynn Grayson came in quietly. She came around, perched on a corner of the desk and said, "Well?"

Hugh combed his fingers through his hair as he looked up at her. He said, "Sounds like a real storm shaping up, eh Burbles?"

"I can see that without you telling me," she said tartly. "And it isn't what I want to know, as you are quite aware. I want you to tell me what happened since I saw you last, Mister Logan. And I want the facts, not some ring-around-the-mulberry-bush fairy story, either. Where did you go and what did you do?"

"Here and there, and thus and so," he evaded clumsily.

"Not really!" Her sarcasm was thick as cream. Then she kicked a slippered toe against his shin. "Tell me," she gritted, "or I'll kick and scratch and scream and howl. I will!"

Hugh shrugged in surrender. "All right. But remember, you asked for it. We busted up the camp where Gentry worked over the brands of that beef herd he stole from us."

"There were men there? Gentry's riders?"

"There were men there. Six of them."

The grimness of his tone took a little of the color from her cheeks. "How—what did you do with them, Hugh?"

He stared straight ahead, at a storm lashed window. "Time we got control of the camp there were four of them—down. There was quite a lot of lead flying."

She was silent a moment. "The other two? What about them?"

Hugh got up, walked over to the window, stared out into the wild murk and gloom. "The oldest law for cow thieves in the book is the best one," he said harshly. "So we used it."

There was a long silence. Then she came softly and stood beside him. One slim hand crept in his and her bright head burrowed against his shoulder. There was a little wail in her voice, "Why must men be that way, Hugh? Why must they make us treat them so, to protect our ranch and cattle. Those things are hard to forget—hard to forget!"

"Yeah," said Logan slowly. "Yeah, they will take a lot of forgetting."

She looked up, marked the somber shadows in his face. She knew the bitterness these things brought to him, yet knew also that he would go on—on until the end, until his conscience told him that his duty was done, his responsibilities met. These things he would do, no matter how deep the bitterness and regret might weigh upon him. He would pay his debt in full.

She clung to his hand a little tighter. "Don't mind me, Hugh. I'm just a crybaby. You are

a very terrible man. But rather, a wonderful one, too." There was a shade of impishness about these last words.

He looked down at her, the lines of his face softening. "You're worse than a scalded cricket, Burbles. If I could just once put a finger on you! But I can't. Your moods slide around me so fast I'm like a halfwit, swinging at shadows."

She moved away from him, wrinkled her nose in jeering derision. "There you go—calling names. Now I'm a scalded cricket. Well, if it was decent weather I'd send you packing, for that, Mister Hugh Logan. As it is, I want company, for that thunder scares me into fits. So you'll please build a fire in the fireplace, and then we'll sit in front of it and argue. And afterwards we'll have supper."

"The fire and the supper sound great," he agreed. "I'm not so sure about the arguing angle. I can't think of anything to argue about."

"Leave that up to me, Mister Logan," Lynn told him briskly. "Leave that up to me. I can always find something to argue about."

AS ABRUPTLY as this off-season storm had formed and broke, so did it stop, sometime between midnight and dawn. And as an aftermath, the wet breath of the soaking earth condensed into a thick fog, which lay over all the lake and range clear back to Cherokee Rim. It was like wet cotton, pressing in on all sides, giving a ghostly quality to all things, half visible, half vanishing.

It let the dawn in slowly, reluctantly. In the short interval of time that it took for men to walk from bunkhouse to cookshack, it frosted their eyelashes and eyebrows with tiny drops of moisture. To Hugh Logan, Johnny McNulty observed, "'Tis a fine mornin' for deviltry to be abroad and prowling. An army could hide in this stuff."

The crew ate in silence, as though the gloom of the morning laid pressure on their spirits. Or maybe, mused Logan, they were thinking of this time yesterday morning, and of what had transpired at that time.

After breakfast, cigarettes going, they trooped out into the fog again, and Ed Loomis asked, "What'll it be today, Hugh?"

Logan, about to answer, was stopped by Johnny McNulty's quick turning head and his soft ejaculation. "Hark!"

They listened and they heard it, faint and far away, a ghostly echo in the fog, north and east, toward the great swing of Cherokee Rim. They heard it again, the bellow of a cow.

These men knew the sounds of cattle, with all their implications. They knew the bellow of a critter when full fed, watered and content. They knew the searching, running bellow of a cow anxious over a strayed calf. And they knew the stolid, protesting bellow of a critter being choused and driven, reluctant at the forced movement. And the bellow they had just heard was the last kind.

It wasn't the voice of a single critter, for it ran out into a steady chorus of protest, muted by fog and distance, which told of many cattle being driven. Hugh Logan said harshly, "We are not the only ones who know that a storm makes Tomahawk cattle gather under the rim. Gentry would know that, too. And he's taking advantage of it! Saddles, men! And hurry. And don't forget your weapons!"

THEY raced away into the fog, close-bunched at Logan's order. They splashed across Silver Creek, now a foaming, miniature torrent, and began breasting the long, steadily lifting slope toward the rim.

Now and then Logan would call a halt and all would listen, straining their ears above the panting of their horses. That muted bellowing was growing harder to locate, to follow, for it was drawing steadily away from them.

They sped on. A few scattered cows they passed, dim shapes in the fog, appearing and vanishing in the same second or two. And Logan noted there was restlessness in these cattle, as though uneasy from disturbance.

The next time Logan stopped to listen, Johnny McNulty slid out of his saddle, went ahead on foot, crouched low, studying the rain soaked earth. He came back nodding vehemently. "Plenty of cows been driven this way," he said. "With fresh horse sign mixed in. They're right out ahead of us somewhere, Hugh."

In the distance lay a deep rumbling, the voice of stormfed waters in Hat Creek. "It'll be no easy chore getting a flock of cows across Hat Creek now," said Johnny McNulty. "And they can't take 'em up the canyon on this side the creek. Should we get a wiggle on, Hugh, we can corner them against the creek on this side."

Logan was thinking about that. But he was also thinking that a blind charge through this mocking fog blanket could carry them squarely

up against the waiting muzzles of ambush guns. They could ride into a trap that would wipe them out. And who could tell but what this might be such a trap?

Logan said harshly, "Johnny and I will go on ahead. Ed, you and the other boys come up a little slower. We don't want to ride blind into a gun trap."

They rode on, Logan and Johnny McNulty in the lead, the other four men back some 50 yards. The thunder of Hat Creek waters grew louder. And now, as an undertone to that thunder, came the protesting, frantic bawling of cattle being forced into a crossing of that flood. Once they heard the shrill yipping of a rider, urging the reluctant cattle on.

With each onward stride of his horse, Hugh Logan sensed the breath of growing danger, of tautening tension. He slid his rifle from the saddle boot, laid it ready across his saddle bow. His eyes ached from the strain of trying to pierce that mocking fog blanket. A cow, running blind and frantic, burst out of the fog and tore by. Behind it loomed a rider.

But that rider saw Hugh and Johnny McNulty as quickly as they saw him and he spun his horse away into the fog shelter in a sweeping turn, his voice lifting shrill in a yell of warning. And then pale flashes winked in the fog and a gun boomed heavily, lead whimpering overhead.

LOGAN threw a shot or two in return, knowing even as he fired that it was useless shooting, that he had not a chance in a thousand of finding a target he could not see. But he did it to serve the purpose of bringing this thing to a head, of turning Gentry's gang from chousing the cattle across Hat Creek, to face off the threat in their rear. Yells reached back and forth through the blank whiteness ahead, then broke to sudden silence, cut only by the roar of seething creek waters and the ever protesting bellow of bewildered, frightened cattle.

"I don't like it," murmured Johnny McNulty. "They're up to something, Hugh. This cussed fog! It tricks a man, makes him see things that ain't there, and hides things that are."

"We'll wait them out," said Logan. "The pressure is on them, too. They don't know how many we are, or where we may be shifting to. Get a little to one side, Johnny—and stay put."

Strain grew with the waiting. Fog gathered on mane and tail of horses, dripped off. It coated a man's face and hands with chill, slippery moisture. It lay in cold, slimy drops on a man's rifle, blurred his sights. It mocked his eyes and tricked his ears. It was at once a sheltering haven and a mocking threat.

The minutes ticked by. Then, off to the right a yell lifted and off to the left a voice answered. Next, hoofs thundered and dim figures came bursting in from either side and guns were flaming.

"Back!" yelled Logan. "Give back, boys!"

He spun his horse, spurring it to a run, shooting at those vague, fog-misted figures on either side. A slug crashed into the bow of his saddle, and the shock shook both him and his horse. The fog, now a friend, wrapped dank arms about them, hid them. And no one had been hit, yet.

Then a slug plunked solidly and Ed Loomis' horse grunted and spun wildly before going down in a slow roll. Ed Loomis swung clear and cursed bitterly. "That's two shot out from under me in two days," he spat. "The third time may hang my number up."

"Swing up behind somebody, Ed," ordered Logan. "And we back up farther. Come on!"

They gave way, more and more downslope. And always those voices called above them, and the searching lead whipped here and there. Ed Loomis, up behind Chuck Denio, said, "Why not sprinkle a few slugs of our own, Hugh? That would make 'em go slow."

"The lead would be wasted and give them our position," said Logan crisply. "Right now they're guessing. Our time will come. Keep on drifting!"

"Watch they don't corner us against the lake shore," warned Johnny McNulty. "Watch that, Hugh!"

"A chance we got to take, Johnny. They figure they got us on the run. Let them. Maybe they'll walk into something. Look up—straight up. What do you see?"

Johnny squinted. "Fog," he said. "Nothing but fog. A little lighter maybe than down beside us—but still fog."

"Then it is lighter," growled Hugh. "I wanted to be sure my own eyes weren't fooling me. Now we'll see—now we'll see. Keep moving boys, downslope. Not too fast, but keep moving. I'm trying a single shot, but the rest of you save your lead.

Logan drove a rifle shot blindly into the fog up-slope. Instantly those voices above came driving in closer and gunfire winked back.

Logan said, "Keep drifting boys. We're pulling them along."

Back they kept drifting, back and back, always downslope. The strain deepened and grew until nerves were raw and jumpy, and men drew their breath through set teeth.

OVERHEAD sounded a wild, plaintive crying, coming from the north, passing and fading into nothingness. The crying of killdeer plover. And as Logan threw a glance upward, he saw that the fog up there was taking on a faint luminosity, and he knew now that what he was hoping would happen, was happening. The sun, lifting over Cherokee Rim, shining on top of the fog blanket, was beginning to burn it away. So now, what he had been desperately planning, could be put into effect.

But he wasn't forgetting that flight of plover, nor where they had come from. Higher up the lake shore those plover had been, and something had startled them, flushed them, sent them scudding to safety in the fog. So he growled, "Stay put and watch, boys. That way. And be ready!"

They stared into the fog as Logan had directed, and they waited and watched. Their straining ears heard before their straining eyes saw. The muffled clump of hoofs, slogging along the soggy lake shore. And because they heard, they were set and ready when they saw, like drifting shadows in the fog, the shadowy shapes of men and horses.

Snarled Logan, "Give it to them!"

They did, in a bursting release of pentup tension and strain. They crashed volley after volley at those shadow figures, cutting down some, scattering the rest in wild and sudden confusion.

"Enough!" rapped Logan. "This way—and keep close up!"

Logan spurred to a run, south, for he had the lake shore located now. The others crowded at his heels, low-crouched. "We gave some of them hell, that trip," exulted Chuck Denio. "We sure put 'em back on their heels!"

A hundred, two hundred yards they sped and then Johnny McNulty called, "Hugh, the sun! It's breaking through. We'll be in the clear in a minute!"

"What we want," shot back Logan. "What I been figuring on. I know these fogs after a storm. They hang thickest and longest down over the lake. Upslope they clear while still blanketing the lake. Pour on the leather!"

The fog thinned rapidly about them. They flashed into a patch of pure bright sunshine, then into another thinning wisp of fog, then out into clear sunshine on all sides. Logan set his mount to a rearing halt, swung down. "Everybody off," he ordered harshly. "Here's where we really give it to them, if we've pulled them along behind—and I think we have. Spread out and catch them as they break out of the fog!"

It came abruptly. One moment was only the weaving belt of fog below them, cottony white now, under the clear glint of new washed sunlight. Then, riders burst through, startled and dazzled by the sudden sunlight in their faces. And lashing gunfire caught them so, with full and wicked intent.

It was savage and relentless business, but the Tomahawk riders knew that with positions reversed, there would have been no mercy shown them. This was kill or be killed. This was showdown!

Men died there, swiftly and violently, in the thin edge of the coiling fog. And those who managed to break back to safety under the sheltering blanket along the lake, were shaken and dismayed, grisly terror in their hearts. Down there in the fog Roan Gentry cursed and ranted at them, trying to pull them together, hold them for further fight. But they broke off into the fog, sullen and untractable, their confidence shaken, their courage gone. And presently, left all alone except for the gunman, Devers, Roan Gentry turned and fled back up the lake shore, using the last remnants of the shrinking fog blanket to hide his escape.

WELL up on the slope above the lake, Hugh Logan and his men rode slowly north toward Hat Creek, watching the fog shrink and retreat from the lake shore, from the lake itself, until all the world lay bright and new under the welcome sun. And now they met cattle, Tomahawk cattle, moving back away from the Hat Creek flood waters, against which they had been jammed by the raiders.

"They may have pushed a few across Hat," said Logan to Johnny McNulty, "but not many. The price is cheap rated against the kink we've put in Gentry."

"It would be a good time to keep after him," said Johnny shrewdly. "We got him on the run, now—and it is the right time to finish him."

"We're going to," said Logan grimly. "We're going to."

Ed Loomis, who had captured another renegade horse whose fallen rider would never need it again, asked, "Where now, Hugh?"

"Running H. We've cut Gentry down to our size, maybe way under it. We're not giving him a chance to build up again."

They circled the curve of the lake until the Running H headquarters came in view. From the distance they watched for a time. There were some riders up there and Ed Loomis said, "Let's get after them. They got the fear of the Lord in them and they'll scatter easy."

"They're scattering anyhow," said Logan. "Gentry is losing riders. See what they're tying behind their saddles?"

"Warbags!" exclaimed Johnny McNulty. "That's it, sure as my name's McNulty. They're packin' their warbags and clearing out."

For nearly an hour they waited and watched. And then all discernable activity vanished from about the Running H headquarters. Logan tossed away the cigarette butt he'd been sucking on and said, "All right. We'll go in, now. We'll split up. Ed, you take a couple of the boys and go up on the south side. Johnny and Chuck and I will go up on the north. Take it easy and keep your eyes open. The grand scheme that Roan Gentry cooked up has fallen all about his ears. But we can't write him off, yet. He's smart enough to have something schemed up. We don't want to ride into it."

They circled wide, working slowly over the slopes, stopping often, looking and listening a lot. But there was no interruption or sign of anyone anywhere. Coming in on the north, Hugh and Johnny and Chuck Denio found the layout's corrals spreading between them and the ranch buildings.

Hugh made another careful survey, then dismounted, rifle in hand. "Same tactics as when I crossed Hat Creek," he said. "Johnny, you and Chuck cover me while I go in and look around. You see anything you can't figure, throw lead."

HUGH prowled up close to a corral fence, then moved along it, his senses reaching and testing everything. He got past the corrals and up among the feed shacks and barns. Over across he glimpsed a move, started to swing his rifle that way. Then he saw that it was Ed Loomis, coming in from the other side. Evidently Ed had seen how Hugh was doing it and was working the same scheme.

Hugh got past the barns, sprinted across a short clearing and got behind the shelter of the bunkhouse. He found that his mouth was a little dry. No matter how chilled and cold a man's courage might be, this sort of thing was tough, plenty tough. Unable to raise sight or sound of anyone, yet not knowing, one second from the next when a slug might crash into him from some unexpected quarter.

He moved along the side of the bunkhouse and at the corner just short of the door, laid his rifle down, drew his belt guns. At close quarters and in fast action, they would be more effective. He drew a deep breath, leaped around the corner and in two driving strides was at and through the bunkhouse door.

The let-down left him almost weak. The bunkhouse was empty. Everywhere were signs of disorder and haste, plain evidence of riders in a fever of haste to grab their belongings and get out. There were some bunks with warbags still tucked under them. Hugh thought grimly that he knew who owned those warbags. The owners would never come to claim them.

Logan turned back to the bunkhouse door and saw Ed Loomis. Ed was standing at a corner of the ranchhouse proper, guns drawn, slightly crouched, looking and listening. Logan whistled softly and Ed looked his way. Then Ed called, "Maybe I'm nuts, Hugh. But something tells me everybody is gone. This joint looks empty to me. Let's go in."

Hugh cut over to him, and his thought was that Ed Loomis was a mighty good man, cool and nervy as they came. Hugh said, "You cover me to the door. Then you come along."

Ed Loomis' guess was right. The ranchhouse was empty. "Flew the coop," said Ed in disgust. "The coyotes, the little wolves and the big he-lobo himself. Hell! I thought Gentry had more salt than that."

"He has," said Logan. "He's up to something. I'm wondering! Go call up the boys."

While Ed was doing this, Hugh took another look around. But he found nothing to give him a lead, except a persistent hunch that Roan Gentry expected to come back to this ranch headquarters. Hugh went out on the porch where the men had gathered. "He's not here," he said tersely, "but he intends to come back. He's up to something, and I don't like my hunch. Back home there's only Smiley

and Cooky—and Lynn. You boys get back there, and don't waste time. Maybe Gentry's crews ran out on him. Then again, maybe they didn't. Maybe they knew we'd be watching and put on a show for us. Maybe right now they're pulling a sneak ride to hit Tomahawk headquarters while we're not there. It is too big a gamble for us to get careless about. You boys line for home."

"Where you going?" demanded Johnny.

"Lake City. Oh, don't worry about me. That's one place Gentry won't be. After what happened to Joe Studinger, should Sam Tabor and Doc Laverne and some of the other boys catch Gentry in town, they'd string him up, quick! I want to leave a little message with Sam. Get going!"

THINGS were quiet in Lake City as Logan rode up Butte Street and dismounted in front of the Two Star. Sam Tabor was alone and set out bottle and glasses at Hugh's nod. Then Hugh told him of what had taken place. "I just came from Running H," Hugh ended. "Empty now as a last year's birdnest. But Gentry will be coming back. Lord knows where he's skinned out to, now. A man could ride himself to death and not come up with him. All we can do is wait it out. That's where you come in, Sam. Keep your eyes and ears open, and if you see or hear anything you figure I might be interested in, you send Jerry, the livery roustabout, out to Tomahawk to tell me. You'll do that?"

"Sure will," Sam promised. "Should any strange riders drift in, anything like that, I'll see you know of it, Hugh. Gentry, he went bad with a bang, didn't he?"

"He didn't go, Sam," said Hugh harshly. "He's always been that way. Only, he's just let it out lately."

Hugh went out, balanced on his heels on the edge of the sidewalk while he rolled a smoke. He felt frustrated, cheated somehow. He knew no sense of triumph over the fact that he'd dealt Gentry two terrific blows. Gentry himself was the crux of the whole picture, and Gentry had got away. Which left the job still unfinished, still hanging in air.

The thought came to him that it might be a good idea to warn Dutch Overhalter as he had Sam Tabor. Such as in case some rider without sound connections was to come in with a grub order that was a little heavy for one man legitimately to order. Something like that might offer a lead. And Dutch was a good hombre. A little slow and prodding, but a square shooter in any company.

Hugh headed for Dutch's store, and as he reached the corner of it and moved into the first shade of the overhang, he saw Bart Delage coming into town at a reaching, but leisurely gallop. He flung up a hand in recognition, then froze in his tracks.

For out of the doorway of the store burst Dutch Overhalter, running clumsily. And Dutch was yelling, "Sam—Doc! Come quick! Hugh—look out, Hugh!"

Dutch ran right off the edge of the store porch and fell flat on his face in the street. And it was well that he did, for inside the store a gun blasted heavily, and the bullet, meant to take Dutch in the broad of his shoulders, passed over his head. Then, leaping into view, cursing venemously, gun poised for another shot, whirled Devers, the Running H hired gunman who had killed Ollie Halleck in Mountain View. And behind him came Roan Gentry!

For a split second the shock of surprise stunned Hugh Logan, held him immobile. And as Devers and Gentry spun on him with ready guns, Hugh knew the frantic certainty that he was going to be late—too late.

Then came the shot, but neither Devers or Gentry had fired it. Instead, it was Bart Delage, and the slug slammed into the front of the store just above them. The two renegades, nerves raw and rasping from what they had been through that morning, were momentarily stampeded by this attack from an unexpected quarter. The split second of indecision which gripped them, gave Hugh the break he needed. His guns whipped into his hands and now, as Devers centered on him, Hugh got there first.

He saw Devers jerk under the impact of the shot, saw him sway outward with a long, loose stride. And Hugh let him have it again and, as he saw Devers' head roll, he went for Roan Gentry. But Gentry went out away from the slug, diving back into the store. And Hugh went after him, racing right past the falling Devers.

IT WAS soft gloom in the store, and Hugh heard Gentry's spurs jangle as the renegade dived for shelter. Hugh ducked in behind a pile of sacked flour, but at an angle from which he could watch the back entrance of the place. Then, for a moment he waited, listening.

Outside, along the street, was uproar. Men were shouting back and forth, running feet pounded along board sidewalks. And Hugh sent his words reaching to Gentry.

"One stud poker hand too many, Roan," he mocked. "You played this one bad. You tried to bluff, with your hole card just a dirty deuce. This town wants you, Roan. They're remembering Joe Studinger, and what you did to him. I'm remembering Jug Malone and Smiley Rickart and Tomahawk cows you stole and blotted. There's a short rope and a stout one waiting for you, Roan. Yeah, you've played this hand rotten. You should have gone right out the back door instead of holing up in here. Listen to the boys outside. They're getting that rope ready. They're going to bottle you up, hogtie you and hang you. Yeah, your trail has run out—for good!"

It was deliberate, it was calculated. And it worked! Roan Gentry heard that tumult outside and read the indubitable significance of it. And he broke, broke for that back door, hoping desperately he could get out that way before someone thought to block it. As he went he threw lead, threw it fast and blindly in the general direction of that hated voice which mocked him.

Hugh Logan pulled down coldly on that rear door, waiting for Roan Gentry to fill it. And when Gentry did, Logan let the shot go.

HUGH Logan and Bart Delage rode out of town together. They went down toward Bart's ranch, with Logan figuring on taking the swamp trail home, around the south end of the lake. Bart said, "Hate and desperation can make a man do fool things, Hugh. After you busted up their raid so disastrously this morning in the fog, apparently all Gentry could think of was to get you. With only Devers to side him, he knew he had no chance unless he could catch you alone, and by surprise. And he set out to do it."

"Funny guy, Gentry," said Hugh wearily. "Smart enough to guess I'd be coming to town, but not smart enough to figure a better place to hide out in than Dutch Overhalter's store. He was gambling again and nearly made it good. But he didn't figure good old Dutch right. He must have never figured Dutch to risk their guns to warn me. But Dutch did. He made that blind break out of the store and he made the warning good, even though he did have to fall off his store porch to save his neck. He fell right out from under the slug Devers threw at him. Dutch will never have a closer call. And he's got something to talk about for the rest of his days."

"And so," said Bart gravely, "it is over with. I hope nothing more like it comes along in my lifetime. It had to be done, of course, yet things like it never leave a range feeling too good, Hugh. Some men can forget, while others can't. Offhand, I'd say you're going to remember it a long, long time."

Hugh nodded, staring straight ahead. "I'll be remembering men like Jug Malone and Joe Studinger, too. I'm also remembering how I misjudged you, Bart. You saved my life today, throwing that first shot, just as you did. They'd have had me dead to rights, but for that. That, and Dutch Overhalter's warning. Debts I owe there, I'll never be able to repay. Well, I'm glad for Lynn's sake. She's getting a real man in you, Bart."

Bart Delage twisted in his saddle, stared. Then he said, "In most things, you're more than smart enough. But right there, Hugh, you're thickheaded almost to stupidity. Good Lord, man! Do you really think Lynn Grayson favors me?"

"She thinks a lot of you. She told me so herself."

Bart laughed grimly. "Sure, I know she does. Lynn likes everybody. I don't mind saying I'd give my right arm to feel that I loomed special in her eyes. But I don't, and I know that. There is only one man really in Lynn Grayson's heart, or has ever been there. I've known it, even before she realized it herself. That man is you, Hugh."

Hugh stared at him, dazed. "You're loco, Bart. Sure, Burbles—Lynn and I get along. She's the brightest, finest thing I ever had or hope to have in my life. But I'm just like a big brother in her eyes. I'm just—"

"Bosh! Wake up, man! Open your eyes. Lynn's not a child. She's a young woman. Really look into her eyes and see what you find there. You'll find Hugh Logan, and nobody else. Well, here's the trail fork. And I'm glad I was able to play some small part in sending you back to Lynn, with your hide whole and all in one piece."

They paused, looking at each other. Then Hugh Logan put out his hand. "You're all wool and a yard wide, Bart. I'm proud to call you friend."

They struck hands; then parted. Hugh headed down into the swamp. He worked to shake the black mood of the past. And by the

time he cleared the swamp and hit the lake shore trail for home there was an impatience, an eagerness in him.

AND in the far distance he saw her, riding down from headquarters to meet him. The sunlight was in her fair hair and the song of the slow wind in the reeds was her voice. He rode slowly, letting her come to him, so that he might watch her.

She faced him in grave silence. Then she said, "This has got to stop. I can't stand it —I can't stand it!"

"Can't stand what, Burbles?"

"Your riding alone. Sending the men home, then riding off by yourself, with Roan Gentry still sneaking around, still waiting and watching his chance to—to kill you. I've been frantic, waiting for you to get back, watching uplake and downlake. And then I saw you and came to tell you—oh, Hugh—you mustn't go out alone again!"

He said, "Burbles, it's all over. Gentry was in town. And it is all over. You don't have to worry any more."

She closed her eyes tight and he saw her lips tremble. She was ready to weep with relief. But she didn't. For her wisdom told her that this man carried scars, scars inside, deep and raw. Scars that would take proper handling to heal—scars which only time and forgetting could heal. And she had to help him to forget. So she set about it.

She brushed a swift hand across her eyes, shook her bright head. Then she smiled. "Let's ride along the lakeshore, Hugh. I want to watch the birds, and hear the ruby winged black ones sing."

So he rode beside her and she threw her bright mood all about her, slyly drawing him into it, and rejoicing to herself as she saw the bitterness about his mouth relax.

And finally they paused upon a little gravel bar and startled a couple of killdeer plover, which winged above them, crying with plaintive loneliness. And Lynn, pursing her red lips to mimic them, like an eager child.

She turned to him, laughing. "Some day I'll learn how. You'll see, Hugh Logan."

The laugh grew hesitant, faded at what she saw in his eyes. A breathlessness came over her, but her own glance held level and unabashed. "Well," she jeered gently, "the man has at last come to his senses. I've been wondering how many thousand years I'd have to wait before he finally really saw me."

"You don't have to wait any longer, Burbles. This is one mood I've solved."

She rode close to him, turned up her face. "I'll believe it when I feel your lips. This is the first time—but kiss me. So I'll know you are real."

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. Aspens in the mountains and cottonwoods along streams are two of the commonest Western trees. What color do their leaves turn in the autumn?

2. Is there a difference between the manner in which horses and cows get up from a lying down position? If so what is it?

3. About how many pounds does a modern type cowhorse weigh?

4. What Western city, famous for its rodeo, derives its name indirectly from the French word for dog?

5. In what state is the site of the famous Indian fight and massacre known as Custer's Last Stand, or Battle of the Little Big Horn?

6. You've heard the old gag that "If a man bites a dog, that's news"—because it would be a very unusual occurrence. By the same standard would "Horse Bites Cow" be news?

7. You would probably find "Guzerat," "Gir," "Nellore" and "Prishna" on a map of India. If you heard these names in Texas, to what would they refer?

8. With reference to saddles, what do the terms "centerfire" and "rimfire" mean?

9. What famous Southwestern gunman, mankiller and outlaw was born in England?

10. If you were a prospector looking for indications of a vein of copper ore, what color or colors of rock would you watch for?

You will find the answers to these questions on page 111. **Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total score is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you still have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.**

BREEZY BUCKAROO

By S. Omar Barker

He was cheerful, he had gall, he could talk a blue streak. But he was all of a man, and could take bad trouble in his stride—a combination Martha Jones found most difficult to dismiss.

BREEZY Briggs leaned from the saddle, picked up a weathered cow's horn from the sand, stuck the point of it inside the left cuff of his black sateen shirt, and twisted until the button popped off. He snagged the horn point in the cloth and tore a rip that left two six-inch flaps dangling. Then he rode his sorrel bronc slowly up the sandy draw toward an unpainted, shacky-looking plank house where a young girl in checkered pink sunbonnet was hanging out clothes.

At least he thought she was a young girl—but not too young. Either she hadn't seen him, or else didn't want to appear immodest by noticing a strange cowboy's approach, for she went right on hanging out clothes—including some that were pink, double-barrelled and had lace on them. Breezy wondered if the face under that porch-brimmed sunbonnet would be pretty. Without knowing why—maybe because the rising sap of spring was in his blood—he felt like it would. Even in a shapeless wash-day dress that looked as if it might have belonged to two of her grandmothers, the youthful grace and shapeliness of the girl's figure was not wholly lost.

As he came nearer, the cowboy could hear her half singing, half humming:

"Oh, fair dove, oh, fond dove!
Oh, dove with the white, white breast."

It was a song he hadn't heard since he was a kid, and sounded purty as hell. Sifty sand in the road muffled his horse's hoofs, so that he had ridden up within a few yards and stopped before she turned and saw him. Breezy had been prepared to see a pretty face, but he really wasn't fixed for such eyes. Wide with startlement, they even out-blued the springtime sky. It wasn't once in a coon's age that Breezy's well of words ran low, but it sure dried up on him now. He gulped, and that protuberance on the front of his long neck, sometimes referred to as the goozlem, goggled helplessly up and down.

What the girl saw, besides this acrobatic Adam's apple, was a long, sparsely built cowboy, wearing a sun-browed face with plenty of goodhumored grin wrinkles on it, a slightly lumpy chin adorned by a prankish little golden-brown goatee, a similarly smallish mustache, a nose neither humped nor swaybacked but distinguished chiefly by the humorous twinkle of acorn brown eyes on either side of it. Even in his present embarrassment, Breezy Briggs' eyes managed to maintain their usual quality of frank, friendly drollery. Surprisingly enough, this facial layout, viewed as a whole, looked reasonably intelligent and masculine.

But the girl seemed unimpressed. In fact, after her first moment of surprise she looked mad—and sounded so when she spoke.

"Scare a body to death!" she exclaimed. "Who are you—and what do you want?"

Breezy had figured out a gay, witty, altogether winning speech in case she turned out to be pretty, but all he found himself able to say now was a sound like "Ugmm."

"Well, say something!" demanded the blue-eyed girl. "Or are you one of these strong, silent men we hear about?"

By now the usual grease of goodhumored gab had begun to ooze back into the cowboy's talking gear.

"Strong as a willer switch an' silent as a bluejay," he grinned. "The boys tell me my tongue's on a swivet and wobbles at both ends."

"Wobble it a little, then!" said the girl with some spirit. "And tell me what you're doing here?"

Breezy's eyes flicked from the flapping clothesline back to the girl's pinkening face.

"Oh, just admirin' the purties."

"I didn't hang them out to be admired—I hung them out to dry!"

"Oh, them!" said Breezy, innocent as a preacher playing poker. "The purties I refer to are chin, lips, dimple, eyes and a little ol'

pink gooseberry nose with nary a wart on it! Not to mention—"

"Then don't!" said the girl. The wash-tub pinkness of her face was getting redder and redder. She ducked her sunbonnet to hide it, picked up her empty clothesbasket and started toward the house. Suddenly she turned, and her blue-eyed gaze was straight and severe.

"I had heard," she said, "that cowboys were gentlemen—that they didn't bother women they happen to find alone!"

"But you ain't alone," Breezy pointed out. "I'm here, ain't I?"

"Nobody asked you to be!"

"Excuse my extended neck!" said Breezy earnestly. "I didn't aim to be rude an' scare you, ma'am. I sure 'nough didn't!"

With a polite lift of his big grey sombrero, he turned to ride away.

"Wait," called the girl in a friendlier tone. "You didn't scare me. And I didn't aim to sound mean. If there was really something you wanted—"

BREEZY came riding back—quick. He held the reins high in his left hand so that the fact that he had a torn sleeve and a button missing could not help being noticeable. But he could see no sign that the girl noticed it. A middle-aged woman with her long, full skirt pinned up at the sides to half knee length came out of the house with an empty waterbucket in each hand. Her face was sweaty but pleasant looking.

"Well, howdy!" she exclaimed. "I thought I heard a man talkin' out here, but I just supposed it was Ben!"

Her eyes, squinting a little in the bright sun as she looked inquiringly up at the cowboy, were a slightly faded but lively edition of the girl's.

"Ben ain't back yet," said the girl, as if she felt like she had to say something. "This—this man just stopped to ask for a drink of water."

"Dry as a duck in a hayloft, ma'am," Breezy agreed. "Here—lemme take them buckets an' carry up a turn for you."

He had started to swing out of the saddle when part of an old calf skin with not much but a small boy's bare legs showing under it, came busting around the corner of the house. Close behind galloped another little boy riding a stick horse with one hand and swinging a ravelly piece of old rope with the other. The kid with the calf skin over his head ran under the neck of Breezy's horse before he saw where he was going. With a quick, supple reach the girl grabbed him away, barely in time. All this sudden strange commotion was more than the sorrel bronc could take. With rollers in his nose, the pony dropped his head and let in to pitch.

Already half out of the saddle, Breezy had to hang onto the horn to pull himself back up. Then for a moment he couldn't decide whether to make a ride of it, or let himself be thrown. It would be worth a couple of busted ribs just to win a little of this blue eyed nester-girl's sympathy. But before he could pick out a suitable place to land, the sorrel stopped pitching. Anyway, instead of staying to admire the ride, the girl had gone in the house.

"Lordy!" exclaimed the button with the rope. "I wisht you'd learn me to ride thataway mister!"

Breezy stepped off, grinning.

"Nothin' to it, sonny. Just git a horse between you an' keep him there! I'll come around some time an' give you a lesson."

The woman let him take the empty water buckets. Breezy started toward the well with them; then paused, eyeing the other boy's half-dried piece of calf-skin, noting the HY brand on it.

"Where'd you git it, kid?"

"Over on ol' Ben's place. It come an ol' rain an' the flood down that ol' dry wash behind ol' Ben's house washed part of the ol' sand off'n it, so me an' Alvie dug it up. It ain't no good, I reckon."

"No, I reckon it ain't," agreed Breezy, and went on after the water.

But men don't bury their own cowhides, and it was generally claimed among cattlemen that homesteaders stole what beef they wanted to eat—and maybe more. Most cow-ranchers tried to put a stop to it with as mild measures as possible, but the HY was a tough outfit, with a gunman crew that boasted they would string up every cowthief they caught, big or small. This Ben, whoever he was, Breezy thought to himself, had better be more careful whose calves he beefed, or else bury their hides deeper.

WHEN Breezy came back with two brimming pails and set them down by the door, the older woman was hanging out clothes. From corrugated sounds inside, he judged that the girl was at the washboard. The two youngsters circled him, admiring his spurs.

"Marthy!" called the woman at the clothesline. "Fetch the gentleman out the dipper!"

The rub-a-dub sounds slacked off.

"It's hangin' outside by the door," Martha called back. "Let him help himself."

Breezy took the dipper from its hook and held it behind his back.

"I don't see no dipper," he called in through the open door. "But never mind. I've got some cow tracks in my pocket—I'll drink out of one of them."

The kids looked up at him as if they wondered whether he was an idiot born or just lately gone crazy, but when he winked at them they grinned.

When Martha came out to find him the dipper he was already drinking out of it, holding it elaborately high so that the torn and buttonless condition of his shirt sleeve could not be missed.

Martha's blue eyes surveyed it calmly.

"How'd you tear your sleeve?" she inquired pertly. "Scratching your elbow?"

"Steer's horn," said Breezy noncommitally.

The smaller boy's eyes got big. "You mean it was a-hookin' at you?"

"Well, sorter." Breezy interrupted his admiring gaze at the girl only long enough to bat his eyes briefly. "Them ol' long horn steers—maybe you've noticed how their horns all got kinder of an upwards twist to 'em?"

This time the girl took the bait neatly.

"Yes, I have," she said. "I've often wondered what makes them grow that way."

"Us cowboys," said Breezy soberly. "We twist 'em into that shape by hand. I was twistin' one this morning, when my holt slipped an'—"

"Marthy!" broke in the girl's mother, coming back with her empty basket. "Can't you see this gentleman's sleeve needs fixin'? Run fetch a needle an' thread!"

"Oh, don't go to no bother, ma'am," Breezy protested feebly. "I'll buy me another shirt anyhow next fall."

The blue-eyed girl brought needle and thread

all right—but instead of tackling the job herself, she handed them to her mother.

"It didn't work, did it?" Breezy smiled at the girl reproachfully.

She seemed to ignore both the smile and the question, but Breezy thought he could glimpse the makings of a tantalizing little grin in the neighborhood of her dimple, as she took the empty basket back inside after more clothes. He sat down beside the older woman on the door-side bench and let her go to work on his sleeve.

"You'd have a right purty daughter, ma'am," he said, loud enough to be heard inside, "if her nose didn't turn up quite so sudden."

"Ol' Ben don't keer if it does!" offered one of the kids sproutily. "Ol' Ben, he—"

"Purty is as purty does," broke in the woman primly. "Yonder's Ben now, comin' with the wood. Alvie, you an' Georgie help him unload and tell him Marthy wants him to stay to dinner!" Her work reddened fingers plied needle and thread nimbly repairing Breezy's shirt. "You'll take wash-day snack with us, too, I reckon?"

Breezy fiddled doubtfully with his small brown goatee.

"You reckon Martha would want me to?" he inquired with disarming frankness.

"Why, sure!" said the nester-woman with a chuckle. "Her an' me are both just a-itchin' to watch that pin-whisker of yours wobble when you chaw! There now you're all sewed up, Mr.—land sakes, I don't even know your name!"

All sewed up is right, thought the cowboy, wondering if the girl wasn't going to come out again.

"Royal P. Briggs on the jail records," he said. "Breezy to you folks—an' I sure do thank you, Mrs.—"

"Jones—spelt J-o-n-e-s. Pete—that's my husband—he's went to town after a load of wire today—he says it's an old French name meaning, 'Spoons on the table, beans in the pot! Dip in, brother, It's all we've got!' Now ain't that silly?"

"Sounds larrupin' to me! I'll go help Ben unhitch."

IN A way Breezy was thankful that Ben Whoever-He-Was had arrived. Without menfolks of their own family or acquaintance present, the cowboy would not have felt free to stay for dinner with two women to whom he was a total stranger. He had already overstepped strict range etiquette even in coming to the house and hanging around as long as he had. But from his first distant glimpse of that pink sunbonnet he had hankered to see what was under it. Now he had seen—and even though his trick to promote the girl's interest by getting her to sew on a button had failed—he began to realize that what he had first thought of as a mere prank had suddenly hoolihanned his heart and left it kicking. If this ain't love at first sight, he told himself, I've shore took a bad case of the giddy gizzard all of a sudden!

He found Ben Halloran a pleasant-faced, black-haired chunk of agricultural muscle in its mid-twenties. When he spoke to Breezy at all his tone was civil, but no more, and the noncommittal grey eyes under his black brows seemed to show a blunt contempt for both the cowboy's breezy talk and his ridiculously debonnair chin whisker.

At table Martha sat next to Ben Halloran. She served his plate solicitously, and whenever she spoke to him her tone was almost proprietary.

Ca'm yourself, Mister Briggs, Breezy told himself, this heifer's done branded!

From Mrs. Jones free and friendly chatter, Breezy learned that Pete Jones and Ben Halloran had wagoned out of Texas together, bought relinquishments and settled here on adjoining homesteads about three months ago. Automatically Breezy's cowboy mind jumped to that fragment of HY calf hide the kids had been playing with, wondering if he oughtn't to take another look at it and see whether it looked to be less than three months old. Still maybe it wasn't any of his business. If the brand on it had been the Rocking R for which he rode, it would be different. But surely he need be no nursemaid to HY strays. Let that high and mighty outfit look after their own.

His inner debate was interrupted by Mrs. Jones, passing him his dessert.

"I hope you ain't too hightoned for prunes. They ain't fancy, but they're fillin'."

"Reminds me ol' Joe Evans tellin' about this batchin' cowboy that found the storekeeper out of prunes. This *commerciante* tried to sell him some newfangled dessert they call Jello-O-Teen instid. 'Hell, no!' says this waddy. I'd just as soon be ridin' at a high lope facin' a west wind with a funnel in my mouth as eat that stuff!' "

Martha hadn't seemed to pay much attention to any of his remarks, but now she giggled and looked across the table at him with a roguish gleam in her eyes.

"I reckon some cowboys wouldn't need any funnel!" she said.

"Well, I wasn't born with such a big mouth," Breezy told her amiably. "When I was a little feller I saw a snake swaller an egg, so I tried to do the same thing. By butterin' it with axle grease I finally got the dang thing in my mouth—then I couldn't swaller it, an' I couldn't spit it out. You know, my Maw had to take her scissors an' widen my mouth at both corners before she could git that egg out. She wanted to sew it all up again, but Paw told her 'Hell, let it go! Now if he bites off more than he can chew, he'll always have room to spit it out!' "

Everybody laughed but Ben Halloran. His momentary grin didn't look much amused.

"That sounds sort of silly, Briggs," he said.

"That must be because one of us is a silly feller," shrugged Breezy goodhumoredly. "I've heard that bein' in love makes a feller that way sometimes."

"Ol' Ben," began Alvie, with a giggle, "he's—"

"That'll do, Alvie!" said Mrs. Jones sternly.

MARTHA blushed and sort of bridled, but Ben Halloran's guileless face never lost its matter of fact expression.

"But I mean," he frowned, "why didn't she just bust the egg and take it out thataway?"

"It was a China egg," grinned Breezy. "An' Maw didn't have no hammer. She'd already busted its handle out tapping me on the back to try an' jolt that egg out."

"Too bad she didn't tap you a couple on the head and shorten your neck a little," said the girl demurely. "Mom, you reckon Pap took his razor with him?"

"Why, land sakes no, child! If Ben'd like to borry it, I reckon your Pa wouldn't—"

"I wasn't thinking of Ben," said the girl sweetly.

Ben Halloran rubbed a hand over his bristle of two-day stubble.

"I know I ort to shave oftener," he acknowledged. "But at least when I do shave, I shave all over."

"That's right smart of territory, ain't it?" said Breezy dryly, and in spite of herself Martha giggled again.

Breezy shoved back his hair. He began picking up knives and forks.

" 'To pay for chuck that suits his wishes,' " he quoted, " 'It's a cowboy rule to wash the dishes!' "

Against Mrs. Jones's protest he went ahead stacking old blue willow plates and saucers that spoke of better days.

"If I aim to git in two more loads this afternoon," said Ben, "I better be hitchin' up." He put out his big, work-calloused hand. "Glad to met you, Briggs. Stop in at my place when you're ridin' by. The door ain't never locked."

It was a frank, friendly gesture that made Breezy feel ashamed of his suspicions about that HY calf hide. Yet he remembered the old saying, "It's the sheepkillin' dog that wags his tail the friendliest."

"Same to you, Ben," said Breezy.

Ben Halloran got his hat, then stopped beside Martha. He put his big arm a little awkwardly around her shoulders and held her sidewise against him.

"That was a right good dinner, Marthy," he said. His eyes rested on the cowboy's face, steady and straight, for a brief moment before he released her and went on out. Breezy saw genuine affection in that brief hug—and more. Ol' Ben ain't so dumb, he thought. Servin' notice on me whose gal she is. All right, ol' sodbuster—I sure don't blame you! She's mighty sweet!

While he washed the dishes, and Martha dried them, Breezy let his tongue wobble waggishly at both ends, as usual, and the drab little kitchen rang with his and the girl's gay, though sometimes foolish, laughter. When he was in the saddle, ready to leave, Martha raised her sky-blue eyes soberly to his.

"I don't mean to speak immodest," she said, "but I reckon maybe I ought to tell you. I'm promised to Ben Halloran."

For a brief moment Breezy seemed to have trouble with his goozlem-gears. Then he grinned widely.

"Ben's lucky—an' I expect he deserves it. You tell him I ain't no gal-stealer, will you, an' I'll dance at your weddin'—even if I have to shave all over to git invited!"

He rode away with a flourish, but turned to look back from where he had picked up the cow's horn. She was out bringing in the dry clothes now, but this time the pink sunbonnet was pointed his way, and she answered his wave.

MAKING up the time spent at the Jones place threw Breezy way after dark getting back to the Rocking R after his round of the bogs. In the bunkhouse Tuck Whipple was still awake, studying a saddle catalog.

"If it ain't Mr. Briggs, the handsome heart-buster!" he grinned. "Find any strays in the Jones's parlor?"

"One heifer," said Breezy, "but she's done branded. Say, Tuck—you reckon I ort to shave this chin-tossle off?"

"I thought you said she was done branded," said Tuck. "By the way, I hear them HY hellions neck-tied a nester over on Tintaroja last week. Claimed they found HY hides under his haystack."

"The hell!" grunted Breezy. "That don't prove nothin'. I saw an old HY calf hide today my own self. Washed up in a draw back of the shack of a newcomer named Ben Halloran. That don't prove him a thief by no means—though some ways I purt near wish it did!"

"You mean he's the Big Itch that's got his brand on the Jones heifer, an' you'd like to see him put out of the way?"

"I don't mean nothin'!" said Breezy sharply. "You know me, Tuck—sometimes my tongue kinder slips out from under me. I reckon I talk too much, but I ain't that low down. Or am I?"

"If it was me," chuckled Tuck Whipple, "that just might depend on how sweet the sugar was. She ain't crosseyed, is she?"

"Not when she looks at Ben Halloran, she ain't!" grinned Breezy ruefully. "Fact is, she's got eyes like—"

"Hey!" growled a drowsy but sarcastic voice from a bunk at the darkened end of the cowpoke dormitory. "Couldn't you love-sick sophomores save your secrets till Sunday an' let the menfolks sleep?"

Humming softly under his breath, Breezy put out the light and fixed for bed. The tune, inaudible even to Tuck Whipple in the next bunk, was *"Oh, fair dove! Oh, fond dove!"*

FOR a week Breezy Briggs managed to keep away from the Jones homestead, though he rode within sight of it half a dozen times. Then one day he spied the pink sunbonnet trying to chouse some cattle out of a garden patch not yet completely fenced. He rode down and choused them out for her. Her face was rosy with exertion, her blue eyes bright and friendly—maybe more than friendly.

No they ain't, neither, Breezy told himself. You're just lookin' at em' through a fog, you damn fool!

"What? No buttons off today?" she teased him. Then as he started to ride away, she called him back.

"The name is Jones," she smiled, "an old French name meaning 'Spoons on the table, beans in the pot! Dip in, cowboy—it's all we've got!' It wouldn't hurt you to stay to dinner, would it?"

Breezy knew it would hurt him, sure, but he stayed anyhow. Ben wasn't there, but Pete Jones was, and he made no secret of his disapproval of cowboys and range cattle in general.

"God made man to till the soil," he remarked. "Not to turn loose a bunch of cattle to shift for themselves while you gad around horseback."

"Yeah," agreed Breezy pleasantly, "but He sure slipped when He planted the grass so you sod-busters have to turn it over, didn't He? Speakin' of horseback ridin'—why else you reckon He made man split up the middle? Reminds me of the one ol' Joe Evans tells about the stampede. This cowboy was ridin' hellbent to head 'em when his horse hit a fence and throwed him off right astraddle of it. Well, sir, this cowboy slid down that barbed wire for half a mile, bustin' off posts as he went. Split him plumb up to his hat brim. Never fazed him none, though. He just let out his stirrups to the new length, climbed on his pony and rode on after his cattle!"

The little story was a success. It helped Breezy keep his eyes off the girl, and it made her father laugh.

When he left, this time without helping with the dishes, Pete Jones invited him to stop by again.

But Breezy had his mind made up not to, and stuck to it. He got himself sent to the HY roundup as a stray man, purposely to keep distance between himself and Martha Jones.

It was at a country dance the week after he returned that he next saw her.

"Oh, fair dove! Oh, fond dove!" he hummed to himself, watching her dance a precise, ladylike waltz with Ben Halloran in his best bib and tucker. Yet he managed to keep everything but impersonal banter out of his eyes when he asked her for a dance. The fact that his right eye was still swollen half shut from

a roundup accident made it easier. He didn't tell her that it was his own absent-mindedness, dreaming about her, that had caused him to let a calf he was supposed to be holding down kick him in the eye. She was solicitous about it.

"Gee, I hope you don't go blind in it!"

"Wouldn't matter much if I did," he grinned. "I've done seen everything worth lookin' at already!"

From the way she blushed, she must have understood that he meant her.

Breezy tried not to dance with her too often, and plenty of other cowboys cooperated to keep him from it. Yet each time Breezy danced with her, he could see Ben Halloran watching them, his face wearing that tight-lined look so typical of male jealousy. Midway of the evening Ben stopped Breezy on his way outside for a smoke.

"Briggs," he said in a low tone, "I don't want you dancin' with my girl no more—this evenin'."

"The hell you don't!" Breezy's temper flared suddenly. "Maybe we better discuss the question outside!"

"Suits me," grunted Ben Halloran. Breezy could see Martha watching them anxiously from the dance floor. Hardly had they stepped outside the door when here she came, her partner trailing reluctantly after her.

"Ben," she said, laying her hand on Halloran's arm. "You're not aiming to—"

"Why, 'course he ain't!" broke in Breezy cheerfully. "We just—"

"Yes, I am too!" broke in Ben stubbornly. "No man can look at my girl thataway when he's dancin' with her, an' git away with it!"

"It's this chin-tossle of mine," drawled Breezy. "Makes me look so flirtatious that some feller is always mistakin' me for a goat. What you want to do, Ben—play me a game of marbles to settle it?"

For answer Ben Halloran swung his big fist. Breezy ducked, taking the blow high on the side of the head. Even there it jarred him, but not enough off balance to prevent his landing a quick uppercut to the big nester's chin. Those were the only two blows struck, for suddenly the girl stood between them.

"For shame!" she cried. "Ben—please go inside!"

She gave him a little shove, and after a stubborn second's hesitation Ben went.

"Got him well trained already, ain't you?" Breezy chuckled. "If you was my girl, tryin' to order me around thataway, I'd turn you over my knee."

"Will you come inside, too, Mr. Briggs?" said the girl, her voice a little tremulous despite its coolness. "I'm going to dance with you just once more, only to show Ben he can't boss me."

"Figger your man needs a little tantalizin' to keep his ardor up, eh?" Breezy broke in. "Okay, sister—only I'm afraid you'll have to hunt you another tantalizer. I got to see a dog about some fleas!"

BREEZY rode late and aimlessly, alone in the moonlight, threshing it out with himself about this girl, resolving finally that the only fair thing to her, to Ben and to himself was not to see her again.

It was nearing midnight when he heard the shot that led him to a rendezvous of riders upon whose actions he felt prompted to spy. Unseen and unsuspected, he observed them from the shadow of junipers above a rimrock, saw what they were doing, and heard what they said. Then, skulking coyote-like back to his horse, he hit the saddle and rode, hard and fast, bound for the sandy draw where stood the homestead shacks of Pete Jones and Ben Halloran. On the way he roused out another nester, gave him a message to carry to Tuck Whipple, for Tuck to rush to the sheriff, and pressed on.

In answer to his urgent pounding, Pete Jones came to the door, sleepy-eyed, bed-tousled, in his underwear.

"Who is it? What you want?" The homesteader did not sound alarmed, only annoyed.

"It's me," said Breezy shortly, and pushed his way inside. "Where's Ben? Him an' Martha home yet?"

"That ain't none of your dang business," began Jones belligerently. "I ain't gonna—"

"I stopped at Ben's shack," broke in Breezy sharply. "He wasn't there! Where is he?"

"What you want of him this time o' night?"

Before Breezy could answer that, Martha's voice came anxiously through the thin partition from her bedroom.

"Ben left about ten minutes ago. He aimed to go home around by his west forty and shut a gate. Please, Breezy, if you're going to make trouble with him, first let me—"

Suddenly the front door banged open and shut again, and a man came crashing in, stumbling over chairs.

"Godamighty, Pete!" he panted hoarsely.

"Hide me! Git your shotgun! I ducked through the fence an' give 'em the dodge—but—but they're comin' around by the road. Where can I hide? They—they're after me!"

The voice was Ben Halloran's and in it there was fear and panic.

"Martha!" Breezy's tone was urgent with command. "If there's a cellar under this house. Git your ma an' the boys an' yourself into it, an' stay there!"

As if to save him the telling, shots slapped the moonlit night outside, and there was an odd, spatty sound of bullets splintering in through the thin plank walls.

"Come out, Halloran, yuh damn cowthief!" yelled a harsh voice.

It was Breezy, loud but calm and drawling, who answered:

"You're barkin' up the wrong tree, boys! There ain't no cowthief named Halloran in here!"

THERE was a moment's silence outside, during which, above the whispering of the women's voices, Breezy heard either Pete Jones or one of them loading a shotgun. Then the voice outside answered, sounding a little more cautious this time.

"The hell there ain't!" A brief pause, then, "An' who the hell are you?"

"I'm the feller that drowned the duck," Breezy called back. "Any you boys want to come in an' curl my tailfeathers?"

Breezy felt rather than saw Martha Jones beside him, pressing a double-barrelled shotgun into his hands.

"Give it to your Pa, or Ben," he whispered. "I've got my pistol. You git down into the cellar quick—before I spank the hide off of you!"

"There ain't no cellar," piped up Alvie, trying to sound bold and brave. "If there was, ol' Ben would already be in it, I bet!"

The silence outside was broken by another volley of shots. By the bullets, Breezy judged that so far at least, they were shooting high, doubtless hoping to bluff Ben into surrender, for this time the spokesman hidden somewhere out there in the moonlight spoke in a different tone.

"Listen, folks," he called out, "we got a warrant for the arrest of Ben Halloran. Just surrender him peacefully to the law an' there won't be nobody else harmed!"

"I ain't afraid to stand trial for somethin' I never done," said Ben Halloran, and now there was a sound of courage in his hoarse whisper. "The law can't convict an innocent man. I'm goin' to surrender, before they hurt somebody."

"Don't be a short-horned idiot," said Breezy sharply. "That ain't the law out there. It's them HY hellions—an' they'll hang you higher than a buzzard roost, innocent or not! Either git you a gun—or git down behind the stove, an' shut up!"

The fact that nobody in the shack had so far fired a shot, Breezy figured, had kept the attackers uncertain. Now he saw moonlight gleam on a shotgun barrel, and on Martha's white face as she eased it up to poke out through a broken corner of the window.

Breezy stepped quickly to her side and pushed her ungently down to the floor. Ben took the shotgun from her.

"I told you to git in the bedroom!" Breezy whispered fiercely. "We ain't goin' to let them take your Ben!"

SOMEBODY outside had evidently glimpsed the gun barrel too. One of the bullets that crashed through the window ripped a neat furrow along Breezy's jaw. His quick answering shot brought a groan.

For an instant Breezy had the panicky feeling that his wound wouldn't let him talk, then discovered that the rip was shallow and his jaw still wasn't unhinged.

"Let's warm 'em up a little now!" he whispered.

Through another window Ben Halloran let go with both shotgun barrels; and beside Breezy, Pete Jones's old .45-70 rifle spat fire.

"So you see, boys," Breezy laughed tauntingly, "all we're armed with is birdwhistles an' stove pokers—an' there ain't but seventeen of us! You want to come count us now, or wait till the sheriff gits here?"

When he got no anwser to that except more shooting, Breezy turned his tongue loose again.

"Hangin' nesters to cover your own cow stealin' has worked purty smooth for you HY mavericks up to now, ain't it? Only this time you was seen butcherin' that calf for a fresh hide to plant under your nester's haystack. It'd be funny if somebody had sent word to Sheriff McIntyre where to come, wouldn't it?"

Now Breezy could hear them arguing, quarreling among themselves, apparently over whether to attack or to clear out. Whether it

was Breezy's threat of the sheriff's arrival—or his bold, foolhardy strategy of flinging open the door and opening a concentrated fire on the woodpile behind which most of them lay hidden—that decided them to clear out, didn't matter. It was enough for Breezy presently to hear the earthy sounds of their horses galloping away.

Without returning to the house, Breezy got his pony from the cowshed where he had left him, found him unharmed, and swung into the saddle. Ben and the Joneses wouldn't need help any longer tonight.

The stocky figure of Ben Halloran came running to stop him, seizing his bridle reins.

"Go back to the house, Breezy," panted Ben. Even his breathlessness could not hide the ache in his voice. "You saved my life. I ain't goin' to stand between you an' Marthy no longer!"

"You're a short-horned idiot, Ben," Breezy drawled. "You ain't under no such obligation, an' if you was, I don't want no gal I got to be made a present of!"

"It ain't that," said Ben glumly, but with the forced good will of a simple, honest man. "I ain't the man for her, that's all. There ain't no use buckin' the facts, cowboy. She told me tonight."

"Ben," said Breezy, speaking soberly for once, "I'm afraid it was my loose talk about that ol' HY calf hide the kids had that got around to them HY hellions and give 'em the idea of pickin' on you in the first place. I ain't nothin' but a blabber-mouth, an' I—"

"You're a short horned idiot," said Ben. "You want to keep Marthy waitin' up all night?"

Slowly Breezy reined his horse around. Martha met him at the door.

"*'Oh, fair dove! Oh, fond dove!'*" sighed Breezy foolishly, and took her in his arms. Without speaking, she reached her arms up around his long neck and kissed him—once, then turned and ran into the kitchen where the rest of the Joneses were hovering over a newly built fire, waiting for coffee to boil.

"Pap," he heard Martha giggle, "can I borrow your razor a minute?"

In the shadow of the doorway, Breezy stroked the small brown tossle of whisker on his chin for what he supposed must be the last time, and grinned—for once unable to think of anything suitably breezy to say.

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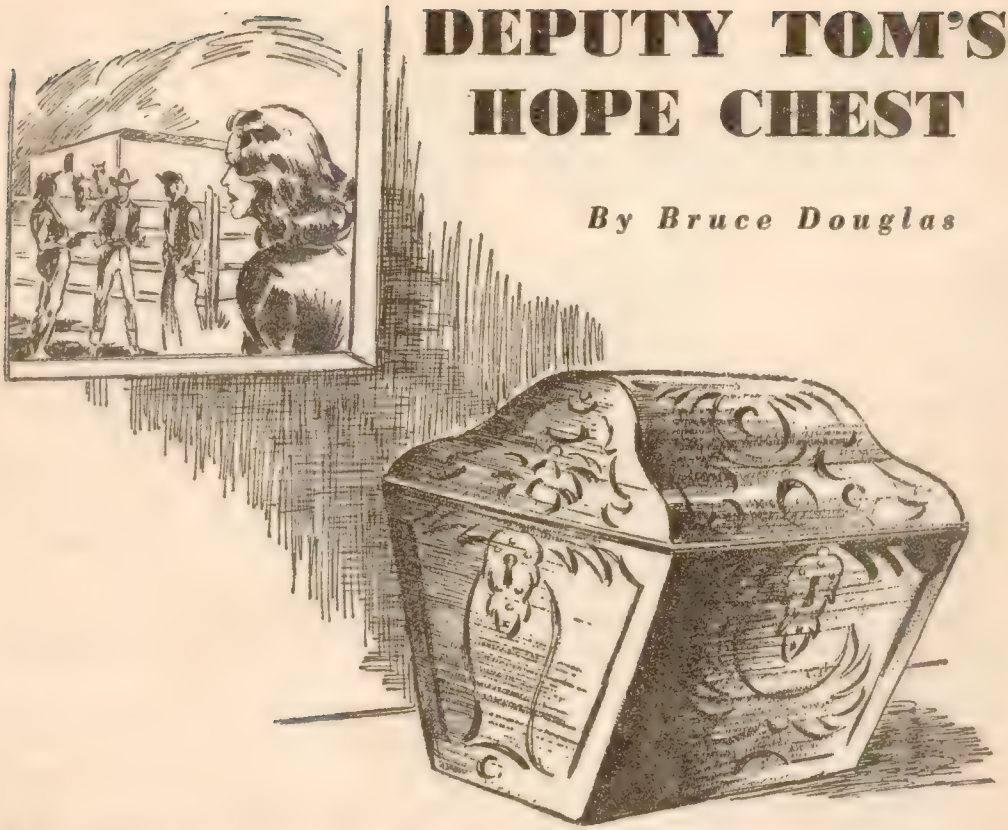
DEPUTY TOM'S HOPE CHEST

By Bruce Douglas



JILL JORDAN was in tears when Deputy Sheriff Tom Davis brought his ranch wagon to a halt near the shed behind Jill's little cottage.

Seeing this, Deputy Tom clambered down from the wagon with unaccustomed rapidity.

Ordinarily, Deputy Tom was slow speaking and slow moving, unwilling to bestir himself except when necessary—and then with an economy of motion which his enemies took for laziness. Those enemies—and particularly Chick Mahler, who was opposing him for the office of sheriff in the coming election—hinted that he was slow thinking, too; though this was a slander. And even Jill, who loved him and had agreed to become Mrs. Tom Davis right after the election, admitted that he lacked the vote-getting dash and glamor of his opponent.

But Jill in tears was something to move Deputy Tom to speed; and he went over the wagon wheel and took her in his arms with an alacrity that left nothing to be desired.

"What's the matter, honey?" he asked anxiously.

Jill buried her face in his rough woollen work shirt. "It's the c-c-calf!" she sobbed. "It's dead! Oh, Tom, I tried so hard to save it. But it just wouldn't eat—and now it has s-starved to death!"

Deputy Tom turned her tear-stained face upward with his two hands and planted a kiss on her lips.

"There, there, honey!" he comforted. "It's too bad. But things like that just will happen sometimes. And when they do, you just got to put 'em behind you an' think of other things. Come over here and see what I've got in the wagon. Something for our new house."

Jill felt better. She always did when Deputy Tom was around. Especially when he put his strong arms around her and held her close and kissed her. She turned now and moved toward the wagon, with Deputy Tom's arm still around her; and a little gasp of delight burst from her at what she saw there.

It was a handcarved old Spanish chest shaped something like an oldfashioned round-topped trunk. Obviously genuine, the graceful carvings glowed with the soft patina of

extreme age. Iron scrollwork surrounded three large keyholes, one on each end of the chest and one at the front.

"It's a—" Deputy Tom gave her a little hug—"sort of a hope chest, honey."

Jill laughed musically. "Nonsense, darling! It's the bride that keeps a hope chest, not the groom!"

Deputy Tom smiled down into her eyes. "Well, I call it my hope chest, anyway. And if I can earn that $500 reward that the Cattlemen's Association has put up for the capture of the rustlers and horse thieves workin' hereabouts, mebbe I can fill it with the fine linens that a hope chest ought to hold."

Jill's face became serious. "You'd better be thinking about winning the election, instead of winning a reward, Tom," she counselled. "Because if you lose that, we'll have to put off our wedding. And Chick Mahler is making headway with his campaign. He's not only making fun of you, Tom, because you act slow and spend most of your time in the jail office instead of riding the range; now he's hinting that you're in with the rustlers and don't want to catch them!"

It was an heirloom, and it had a history, but never had that hope chest served a bride so well as it did Jill Jordan.

Deputy Tom's face was suddenly serious. "Chick Mahler," he said slowly, "can poke fun at me if he wants to. But he's got no call to accuse me of bein' crooked. It's—it's like hittin' foul in a fair fight."

HE REMAINED silent for a long moment, grimly thoughtful. Then the look of annoyance left his face, and he drew from his pocket a key at least ten inches long.

"Look, honey," he said, and lifted the top of the chest. An even dozen of hook-shaped iron claws came into view, three on each of the four sides. Deputy Tom inserted the key and turned it. The hooks did not move. He repeated the operation in the second keyhole; and still nothing happened. But when he turned the key in the third keyhole, all twelve of the iron hooks changed their position.

"Twelve locks and three keyholes," Deputy Tom explained. "You got to turn the key in each keyhole before she'll open up. Those old Spaniards really knew how to make a chest hard to break into."

Jill said: "Wasn't it awfully expensive?" And Deputy Tom grinned.

"Remember," he asked, "that time when I was 'way down in the southeast corner of the county and found that Señora Mendoza all alone in that Mexican ranchhouse havin' one of her numerous kids? There wasn't any doctor within 100 miles; so I had to pitch in and help, remember? Well, they sent this in as a sort of token of appreciation. Been in the family 400 years, they said. Used to belong to one of the Conquistadores. It's a pretty expensive gift; but they'd be offended if I turned it down. Come on, honey. Hop up on the seat, and we'll drive over to the new house and pick the place where we want to put the chest."

A loud and mournful moo turned Jill's eyes back toward the shed. "I hate to leave Molly," she said. "Poor Molly, with her little dead calf!"

Deputy Tom said practically, "Mebbe we can find her another calf to nurse. Then she'll be all right."

He took Jill's hand and helped her up onto the wagon seat. But when she was settled, Jill said doubtfully, "Are you sure you can spare the time, dear? Oughtn't you to be out campaigning? Or riding the range after rustlers as Chick Mahler is challenging you to do? Mahler is really making a lot of headway among the voters, I tell you, Tom."

"But, honey," Deputy Tom protested as he got up beside her, "where would I ride? You can't just mount your hoss and gallop off in all directions. That may be dashin' and glamorous. It may even be vote-gettin'. But it ain't sheriffin'. Not the way my daddy taught me the trade."

He kissed her again, just an affectionate little peck, as he picked up the reins.

Jill sighed dubiously and snuggled over close. The contact sent little thrills running up and down her side and in to her heart. It was comforting, reassuring. For the moment it deadened the fear and dread which for days had been growing within her. Tom was so fine, so strong, so capable. Even though he wasn't spectacular, the voters couldn't help but realize this. Tom couldn't lose . . . he couldn't!

SHE thrilled, too, as they approached the ranchhouse. It was brand new. Jill and Tom had worked out the plans more than a year ago; and Tom supervised the building in his spare time. It was finished now, and furnished with the things which they had acquired piece by piece during their long engagement. The ranch itself was small. Just a barn and an enclosed acreage where Tom raised and broke horses to the saddle. He had five, gentled and ready for sale, in the pasture. A sheriff, Deputy Tom had said, couldn't handle anything much bigger and not slight his job.

They had about decided upon a spot opposite the fireplace in the living room for the Spanish chest; but before Deputy Tom had had time to lift it out of the wagon, a disturbance occurred to draw their attention.

It was the loud and mournful mooing of a cow. The sound seemed to come from some distance, probably from over the wooded ridge beyond the limits of Deputy Tom's property. Deputy Tom cocked an ear in that direction and listened.

"Sounds like another cow in the same trouble as Molly," he declared. "Let's go have a look."

Leaving the wagon, they cut through the fenced meadow and mounted the ridge. Reaching the top, Deputy Tom halted, and his face fell into stern lines.

"Look at that!" he said, and pointed.

Jill followed the line of his outstretched arm. In a clump of brush, tightly tied so that she could not move away, a range cow was tied. And at a little distance, tightly tied in another clump of brush, was a blatting calf.

Deputy Tom made a motion for Jill to stay back, and slowly walked down the slope. Jill followed at a little distance. Deputy Tom halted close to the two animals.

"Look," he said. "The cow's brand is Box M. That's Chick Mahler's brand. But look at the calf. That's a fresh burn; it's been branded less than a day. Look at that brand! It's our brand—a Slash JM!"

Filled with sudden foreboding, Jill came close and laid a hand on his arm.

"What does it mean?" she whispered.

She felt the muscles of his arm stiffen, saw his jaw grow tight and his grey eyes go cold and wary. When he spoke, she felt the leashed power behind his tone.

"It's a trap," he grated. "We've got to work fast. Somebody has put our brand on that calf and tied it away from its mother to make it look like I was stealin' calves by range brandin'."

"But—" Jill said hesitantly, "but who?"

Deputy Tom's voice cracked like a whip. "Who would it benefit most?" he demanded. "Chick Mahler has been accusin' me of crookedness. Now he's framed this up. That's plain enough. Quick, Jill, we've got to work fast. Get a pail from the house an' milk this cow dry. Hide the milk in our new springhouse. Then stay in the house until I get back!"

HE SPRANG into such quick and determined action that even in her present tension Jill had time to wish that those voters who had thought him slow and lazy could see him now. First he removed the Spanish chest from the wagon and carried it into the house. Then he took the bound calf from the brush and laid it in the wagon. And finally he drove rapidly back toward Jill's cottage.

Jill watched him go, wondering what plan was in his mind. Then she got a pail from the kitchen and started out to obey orders. The cow was milked dry and the milk was safely immersed in the cool water in the springhouse by the time Deputy Tom drove back into the ranch yard. Jill came out of the house and watched him wonderingly. She followed him as he removed Molly's dead calf from the wagon, carried it over the ridge, and laid it down close to the tied Box M cow. Not until both of them had returned to the house did he volunteer an explanation. There was a tight grin on his face and a twinkle in his gray eyes as he turned to her.

"Molly took to that calf without raisin' any objection. If anybody finds it and asks about the brand, all we need to say is that all our livestock is bein' branded Slash JM because we're gettin' married right after election. So, honey, we seem to be a calf to the good."

Jill's eyes were round and horrified. "But, Tom!" she protested. "That's—why, that's plain stealing!"

The clatter of hoofs sounded on the road, rapidly growing louder. Deputy Tom peered out, then turned back to her with a broad smile.

"When a man puts your brand on his calf, it ain't stealin' to accept the gift. Here comes the committee, just like I expected. You just keep quiet and leave the talkin' to me, honey."

Chick Mahler, flashy and powerful-looking atop his speeding horse, was in the lead. Behind him came Joe Sallee, a prominent local cattle rancher and head of the Cattlemen's Association. Then Ray Benson, the banker, and two middleaged storekeepers from the nearby county seat. They reined in to a quick halt in the ranch yard and dismounted.

"He's here!" Chick Mahler exclaimed loudly. "We can accuse him to his face!"

Deputy Tom came down the steps from the porch, his face calm and unreadable.

"What's all this?" he demanded. Then he nodded to each of the party in turn and spoke to them.

"We've caught you now, Tom Davis!" Chick Mahler declared. "Caught you redhanded!"

He beckoned the group with a jerk of his head. "Come on! Bring him with you! It's just over that ridge."

Deputy Tom fell in beside the cattleman; and Jill followed behind all the rest as they hurried toward the ridge.

Joe Sallee flushed and looked uncomfortable. "Mahler says he's got evidence that you been calf stealin'. As head of the Cattlemen's Association, I come along to find out."

Deputy Tom's voice sounded hurt. "Why, Mr. Sallee, after knowin' me all my life, and my father before me, I wouldn't think you'd credit a thing like that!"

The big rancher's tone was stubborn, and he did not look directly at Deputy Tom.

"Jeff Davis was a mighty fine sheriff," he declared. "But sometimes a father's brand don't seem to git burnt in deep on a son. Just hairbranded, sort of, not goin' through the hide."

They topped the ridge, and Chick Mahler hurried ahead. "There!" he exclaimed triumphantly. "Look at that! That's my cow; you can see her brand. Now look at the brand on that calf over—"

He broke off in midsentence as he discovered the dead calf lying close to the cow, and no calf over in the brush where he was pointing. His voice terminated in a kind of angry squawk.

DEPUTY TOM stepped forward, the members of the Citizens' Committee close behind him. He looked down at the skinny body of the dead calf. Standing far to the rear, Jill had to press her hand over her mouth as she saw how hard Deputy Tom was straining to hold his face straight. It was still wooden and expressionless as he turned back to the committee.

"I don't understand," he said. "Where do I come into this? This calf has no brand on it. It's too young to be branded, and now it's dead."

"Well, it did have!" Chick Mahler bellowed angrily. "Your brand! And it was tied up over there away from the mother to wean it quick. It's been changed!"

Deputy Tom's dry tones cut in. "It's plenty easy to untie a calf," he stated, "and I can't prove that I didn't. But I shore wouldn't know how to unbrand one."

He looked pityingly at Chick Mahler, then turned his eyes on the committee. "Look at that cow, gents. Plumb dry. And the pore calf lyin' beside her starved to death. Mr. Sallee, I reckon there ain't any law ag'in it if a man is loco enough to tie up his own cow so's she can't graze, and her calf starves. But it just ain't sensible. My dad always said if a man don't show good sense in his own business, he won't show good sense if elected to office, neither."

There was a murmur of low laughter from the townsmen; but Joe Sallee's eyes were reserved and questioning. Chick Mahler's face grew purple with rage.

"It's a frameup!" he bellowed, and stamped up the slope and disappeared down the other side.

Deputy Tom said mildly, "Frame-up? Yeah. But somehow the frame sort of come unstuck."

They heard the sudden rumble of hoofs as the angry and discomfited candidate spurred rapidly away toward town, not waiting for the committee he had brought with him.

Joe Sallee faced Deputy Tom squarely. "There's been some slick work done here, one way or another. It don't stand to reason that Mahler would bring us out here if he didn't have evidence. Mebbe he made a mistake in not leavin' a man to guard that evidence when he come in for us. Anyway, this story ain't goin' to do you any good with the electorate."

He led the committee across the ridge and back to their saddled horses. Jill and Deputy Tom followed. When the old cattleman was mounted, he turned to look sternly down at Deputy Tom.

"Tomorrow is election," he stated. "This afternoon Chick Mahler is makin' his final speech from the courthouse steps. Mahler is accusin' you of bein' hand in glove with the

rustlers. Sittin' around and doin' nothin' while cattle and horses are run off, then takin' your cut from the rustlers. I'd advise you, Tom Davis, to be on hand this afternoon and make your answer—if you've got any."

Deputy Tom said shortly, "I'll be there when the time comes."

Watching them ride away, Jill moved over close to Deputy Tom.

"Tom!" she breathed, her voice laden with fear. "Oh, Tom! They—they really believe that you're dishonest. You've got to win now, Tom; you've got to! Because if you don't, it won't just mean putting off our wedding. It will mean disgrace!"

Deputy Tom did not answer. His shoulders were sloping dejectedly as he walked slowly toward the new ranchhouse.

LATE that afternoon Jill stood miserably at the edge of the crowd on the courthouse lawn. Chick Mahler had been addressing the crowd for more than a quarter hour, and still Deputy Tom had not appeared.

Her heart heavy with anticipation of the defeat which appeared inevitable, Jill studied the crowd, and the candidate. Chick Mahler was smiling and confident, swaying the crowd with practised oratory. Jill was too tense to follow what he was saying; but from time to time the crowd would laugh or mutter in response to something he said, and she could see that they were for him.

In a way, she felt responsible for what was happening. More than a year ago she had made her choice. Choosing between this flashy, self-confident man up there on the courthouse steps and the quiet, unassuming, unspectacular Deputy Tom. And from that moment Chick Mahler had been planning his revenge. For no other reason, Jill was certain, would Chick Mahler have entered the race for the office of sheriff. His chief purpose was not to win the office, but to deprive Tom of it. Tom—who had grown up as a deputy under his father and would be lost in any other occupation!

Looking down the dusty street Jill saw Deputy Tom approaching; and again her heart sank. He was driving that old ranch wagon! Why, she asked herself, couldn't Tom come riding in on one of his own saddle horses, dressed like a sheriff, wearing a big broad-brimmed Stetson, and with his badge gleaming on a fancy cowhide vest? Why couldn't he dramatize himself before the voters instead of coming in a wagon, and dressed in old work clothes?

Chick Mahler saw him; and all eyes turned toward Deputy Tom as Mahler made a dramatic gesture in his direction.

"Here he comes!" he exclaimed, raising his voice. "A fine figure of a man to be the next sheriff of this county!"

There was a general laugh; and Chick Mahler brought his index finger around to point at the crowd. His eyes flashed.

"Folks," he said, "I will now come to the main point in my campaign. Thieves are roamin' this county stealin' cattle and horses right and left. But does our acting sheriff ride out and bring them in? No! He spends his days in town at the jail office, and his nights at that new ranch house which he has built and furnished while this thievery is goin' on. I ask you: where does our acting sheriff get all the money to build this house and buy sumptuous furnishings for it? Can it be that he is hand in glove with these rustlers? Does he receive a cut from them—out of your losses, stolen out of your pockets? Folks, I tell you it looks like it! I have repeatedly challenged him to ride out and bring in the rustlers. But he does not go. I challenge him again. Now! To his face!"

He swung about and leveled his finger straight at Deputy Tom.

"Tom Davis, almost every night cattle or horses are stolen in this county. It is safe to say that this very night some one of our neighbors will be made the poorer by the loss of horses or cattle. Will you, or will you not, mount your horse and spend this night riding the range in an effort to capture those rustlers and bring them in?"

ALL eyes were on Deputy Tom as he got down from the wagon and walked slowly up the walk to stand beside Chick Mahler on the courthouse steps. He turned questioning eyes on Mahler.

"You're plumb certain that there'll be some cattle or horses stole tonight?"

"I'd bet on it!" Chick Mahler answered loudly. "As long as this county has an inefficient and probably dishonest law officer, it'd be the only safe way to lay a bet."

There was a flurry of laughter in the crowd. Mean laughter, with an undertone of contempt in it.

Deputy Tom removed his disreputable hat and scratched behind an ear.

"Well, I ain't so shore about it," he drawled. "But I'll be willin' to make this agreement with you, Chick." He straightened and turned toward the crowd; and his back was straight and his face earnest when he spoke again.

"You challenge me to ride. All right, I'll ride. I'll ride all night. But I'll make a further agreement with you, Chick Mahler. You say there'll be rustlin' tonight. All right, if there is—if cattle or horses are driven off tonight—I'll either get the evidence and arrest the thief before the polls open tomorrow, or I'll withdraw my name and concede you the election!"

A murmur in the crowd rose and swelled into a sudden cheer of admiration. But back at the rear of the crowd Jill gasped and lifted a hand to her constricted throat. She had hoped that Tom would be dramatic, that he would act in such a way as to seize the crowd. But now—now he had sealed his own doom! One night—one single night! For weeks the rustling had been going on, and he had found no trace to follow.

Fervently she prayed that there would be no rustling that night. That way, and only that way, could Tom stay in the race.

She mentioned her hope to Deputy Tom after Chick Mahler had leaped triumphantly to accept the challenge and make it binding, and the crowd had finally drifted away.

Her only answer was an enigmatic smile. "Oh, there'll be rustlin', all right," he said in a tone perplexingly cheerful. "I reckon I got that plumb arranged and nailed down."

With which cryptic remark he helped her into the wagon and drove all the way home without another word.

ALL night Jill tossed and turned sleeplessly on her bed, a prey to innumerable fears. In the early morning she saddled her horse and rode over to the new ranchhouse, unable any longer to bear the uncertainty.

Chick Mahler was striding up and down triumphantly. Joe Sallee refused to meet her eye; and the others turned away as she rode up and dismounted.

"Is—" she stammered, "has Tom come back?"

"Not yet," the old cattleman grunted grimly. "We're waitin' for him."

Jill's next words came in a frightened whisper. "Was there—rustling last night?"

Chick Mahler swung toward her, leering cruelly. "There was! And if you know what's good for you, missy, you'll ride on back home and not wait for the end of it."

Jill's chin lifted proudly. "I'll wait," she declared.

Deputy Tom came riding leisurely over a hump in the road. He seemed calm and unhurried as he reined in and dismounted. He looked casually from one to another of the group.

"Committee again, I see," he said dryly. "That's good. I need some witnesses."

With a sudden sweep of his arm, Mahler drew his gun and trained it on Deputy Tom.

"This time," he snarled, "you don't crawl out of it!"

Not even by the flicker of an eyelash did Deputy Tom betray his knowledge of that leveled gun. He turned toward Joe Sallee.

"You heading this committee?"

Joe Sallee nodded.

"Then," Deputy Tom said, "I got a right to ask one thing. I don't mind bein' held up at the end of a gun. Providin' you gents will draw your guns and cover Chick Mahler too."

He stared hard into the eyes of the old Cattlemen's Association head. And finally Joe Sallee nodded.

Chick Mahler opened his mouth to protest; but seeing the look on the face of the old cattleman, grudgingly pouched his gun. Joe Sallee and the others drew theirs.

Deputy Tom said, "What is this evidence against me?"

Again the light of triumph blazed in Chick Mahler's eyes.

"I'll tell you, rustler!" he snarled. "Just like I thought, there was rustlin' last night. And you'd be resignin' from the race this mornin' because you didn't bring in the rustlers."

Deputy Tom cut in. "I didn't say I'd bring in the rustlers. I said I'd get the evidence and *arrest* the rustler."

CHICK MAHLER sneered. But from her position a little to the rear of the group, Jill saw a peculiar expression come into the eyes of Joe Sallee, and the old cattleman edged sideways a little into a new position.

"And right smart of you to say so!" Mahler sneered. "To cover your own tracks! But you're caught, hombre. Five of Mel Lawson's horses were stolen from his corral last night and driven plumb out into the badlands across the county line to the south. To drive

those hosses that far, and come back, the rustlers'd have to be ridin' at top speed practically all night. Now, if you still want to brazen it out and pretend we ain't got the goods on you, rustler, step over and take a look at those four hosses in your meadow!"

Four horses stood in the meadow, their heads hanging low with exhaustion. They were breathing heavily; and they were completely lathered with sweat.

Joe Sallee spoke up gruffly. "We been the rounds, Davis. There ain't another horse in the district that's been ridden hard last night."

To Jill the words came like the tolling of doom. But Deputy Tom seemed singularly unaffected. In fact, he was even smiling as he turned to face the old cattleman.

"It shore looks like those horses were used in that horse stealin', Mr. Sallee. In fact, I'm willin' to admit it, if Mahler, here, will admit it, too."

Again that puzzled look appeared on Joe Sallee's face.

"What d'yuh mean by that, Davis?"

Deputy Tom was grinning widely now. "Keep those guns trained, folks," he warned. "On both of us!"

Then to the cattleman, "You ain't the only ones that took a little *pasear* around this mornin', Mr. Sallee. You found the horses. But I found somethin' else. It's plain that those horses were ridden fast all night. They're tuckered out, and lathered. Now, with horses as sweaty as that, wouldn't you expect to find some pretty wet saddle blankets too?"

Chick Mahler snarled, "He's stallin'! We got th' goods on him. Bring him in to jail!"

But old Joe Sallee said quietly, "Hear him out. What's all this about, Tom?"

Deputy Tom smiled. "I took a little *pasear* myself this mornin', Mr. Sallee. Just before I came back here. And what do you think I found hangin' on the corral fence over at Chick Mahler's Box M? Four saddle blankets. Plumb soaked with sweat! If you all want to come on over there, I'll point 'em out to you."

But there was no need to go and look at the evidence. Because at mention of the soaking blankets that gave him away, Chick Mahler snarled a curse and charged at Deputy Tom. For a moment the two men were merged in a whirling scramble of arms and legs. Then came the sharp crack of bone on bone; and Chick Mahler slumped limply to the ground. Deputy Tom stepped back and blew on his knuckles. Producting a pair of handcuffs from a pocket, he snapped them securely on the unconscious man's wrists.

THEY stood in the living room of the new ranchhouse—Jill and Deputy Tom and Joe Sallee and the rest of the committee. Chick Mahler, again conscious and nursing a cracked jaw, had been stowed unceremoniously in the back of the ranch wagon. Joe Sallee drew a long breath and let it slowly out.

"Well, that's that, son. You got him. And you'll be elected without opposition. And you get the $500 offered by the Cattlemen's Association. But I shore don't see—"

Deputy Tom had his arm around Jill. He gave her a little hug, and laughed.

"I saw it comin'," he declared simply. "After Mahler framed me yesterday, an' then made plumb certain that I'd be away from this place all night, it was pretty plain what was in his mind. So I nailed down the last doubt by fixin' it so's he *have* to pull a rustlin' to get me to resign."

Old Joe Sallee clapped Deputy Tom on the back and then threw back his head and roared with laughter.

Still staying within Deputy Tom's encircling arm, Jill turned a questioning face up to him.

"It all sounds very simple, darling, the way you tell it," she said. "But the thing I don't understand is how you knew he and his men would use their own saddle blankets when they took your horses."

Deputy Tom gently removed his arm from around her and stepped over to the Spanish chest.

"Well," he said slowly, drawing the big key from his pocket, "that was arranged, sort of. When they got over here and didn't find any blankets to go with the horses, they just had to use their own."

He deftly inserted the key in each of the three keyholes and lifted the box lid.

"Honey," he said apologetically, waving a hand toward the stack of saddle blankets the chest contained, "I know these ain't the kind of fine linens that belong in a hope chest. But last night I figgered they were plumb valuable enough to lock away!"

He turned to her with a little twisted smile. Jill said, "Darling!" in a breathless voice and moved toward him. Then all speech became impossible as he took her into his arms and lowered his lips hungrily to hers.

The Passing of Texas Jack

By Paul Evan Lehman

"Texas Jack" was a name to inspire dread, not only in badmen, but, for a new and tragic reason, in the very heart of its owner. Life had never posed a greater problem for valiant Nancy Pierson.

THIS town was different; John Bradford realized it the moment he rode into its single wide street. There was an air of refinement about it which had been lacking in the other towns through which he had passed; the buildings were substantially constructed and most of them freshly painted; the sidewalks were in good repair; even the inevitable dust seemed cleaner. And although he had traversed fully half the length of the street, he had yet to see a saloon. Decidedly the town of Domingo was different.

On Bradford's left rose a timberclad mountain which lent the fragrance of juniper and pine; to his right was the floor of a verdant valley where cattle would thrive. Bradford drew a deep breath, his eyes kindling with satisfaction. This was the place he had been seeking, the ideal spot for an ex-lawman who was sated with excitement and gunplay and had realized in time that the path of glory leads but to the grave.

Here at Domingo the name and fame of Texas Jack would not have penetrated; if it had, the famous gunman would not for a moment be associated with this quiet, somewhat somber John Bradford who had so unobtrusively become a part of it. A homestead in the valley, a small herd of cattle purchased with the money that honest sweat and blood had earned him, and Texas Jack would fade into a memory, his eventual end obscured in the mist of Western history.

Bradford halted before a large frame building whose modest sign proclaimed it the Pierson House, tied up at the hitchrail and went inside. The lobby was unpretentious but clean, and its single occupant was a woman with a towel about her head who was dusting the furniture. At the sound of his step she straightened, brushing back a strand of hair; and Bradford found himself gazing into eyes that were deep blue and silken-lashed and honest, and in the space of a single heartbeat something happened to him.

The animal, be it beast or man, that moves in an atmosphere of constant danger, de-

velops a sixth sense which passes on each new contact, warning or soothing, repelling or attracting. Bradford had known the sudden stiffening of spine when he looked first into the face of a man who wished to kill him; he had felt the instinctive warmness which told him that another meant him no harm; he had reacted to the clammy warning that still another would betray him if the chance presented. But the feeling he experienced when he looked at this girl was different.

Her face, at first sight of him, had brightened; now she let her gaze fall to the heavy guns at his hips, and the warmth left her. She looked up again, eyes steady and cold "Yes?"

He removed his hat. It was on his lips to ask, "Where can a fellow get a drink around here?" He said instead, "I'd like a room for the night."

"I'll call my uncle, but I'm afraid we haven't any."

She crossed the floor to a door, opened it and went into another room. Bradford noticed

the quick grace of her movements and knew that his heart was beating more rapidly than its wont. He wondered vaguely what had happened to him, then forgot the wonder in the girl's singular answer. No room for him —in a town as dead as Sleepy Hollow!

A MAN came into the room. He was erect and dignified in appearance, with grey hair and mustache and a goatee which reminded Bradford of a Confederate general. When he spoke John knew him indeed for a Southerner.

"Good evenin', suh. My niece tells me you want a room. Are you passing through Domingo or do you plan to remain?"

"I'm not sure. I'm looking for a place to settle and raise a few cattle. The valley looks mighty nice to me."

The change in the man was almost magical; the poker face relaxed into a smile and the skeptical hardness left his eyes. "I'm right glad to hear that suh! You're mighty welcome. This is fine cattle country, and the main trail follows the river. I'm Randolph Pierson, suh." He came forward, his hand extended.

Bradford gripped it. "The name's Bradford—John Bradford."

"I'm proud to know you, Mr. Bradford. Let me make you acquainted with my niece, Miss Nancy Pierson."

The girl had been standing in the doorway behind him, and now as she came forward Bradford saw that the change had communicated itself to her. She was all a lovely warmness again, the blue eyes soft and smiling, the full lips curved. "I'm glad to know you," she said, and gave him her hand.

The fingers that could hold a sixgun rock steady trembled slightly, and as though their touch had sent an answering thrill through her, the warm blood mounted to Nancy's cheeks and the blue eyes were quickly lowered. "I hope you'll decide to stay," she said. "We have a room for you, of course."

The sweep of the dark lashes against the dusky cheek intrigued Bradford; he stood with his hand extended even after she had gently disengaged her fingers.

"I'll show you to your room," came Pierson's voice. "You'll want to put up your horse, too. The charge will be a dollar and a half a day."

Bradford signed the register and followed Pierson up the stairs. Near the top he stopped and turned. Nancy Pierson was standing in the lobby looking after him, but as his eyes found her she hastily went to dusting again.

The room was in the front, large and comfortable and clean. There was a washstand with bowl and pitcher and fresh washcloths and towels. Bradford washed up, then went outside and walked slowly along the street. At its extreme end and on the far side was a newly built structure of considerable size bearing a large sign which read: Potluck Amusement Palace. A man lounged against the front of the building, and Bradford had the distinct feeling that the fellow was furtively watching him. He crossed the street and pushed through the swinging doors.

There was a long bar at one side with a single attendant behind it, a row of tables for chuckaluck, roulette and faro, several round ones for poker, and a string of chairs along the other wall. At the end of the place was a small stage and a piano. The room extended around the end of the bar by means of an ell, but Bradford couldn't see what this contained. He walked up to the bar and called for a drink, and while it was being served the man who had been outside the place popped up beside him.

"You lookin' for Cole Engle?" he asked from the corner of his mouth.

"Who's Cole Engle?"

"Owns the joint. Expectin' some fellers in. You one of 'em?"

"Never heard of him," answered Bradford shortly. He downed his drink and went out. That slinky little man had been a jailbird, he knew.

THERE was a store across the way and he went inside and bought some tobacco, then sat down on the bench outside and rolled a cigarette. When half an hour had passed, he got up, went back to the hotel and took a chair in the lobby. And he hadn't been there ten minutes when Nancy came down the stairs.

Her loveliness gripped him like a living thing. She wore a starched print dress, white stockings and black slippers, and the soft dark hair, now unconfined, made an ebony frame for the warm, dusky face. He got to his feet and she came over to him, smiling and friendly. Dropping gracefully into a chair, she motioned him to sit beside her.

"I reckon we owe you an apology," she said in her soft Southern voice, "for our cool-

ness when you first came in, Mr. Bradford." He liked the way she spoke his name, all the harshness removed from the r's. "But we had our reasons, of course."

His lawman's suspicious mind had been asking why, but he did not question her. "You've made up for it since, you and your uncle. You have a nice hotel; too nice for the average trail town."

"But Domingo isn't an average trail town. Domingo is Spanish for Sunday, and the town is as clean as its name. You see, practically everybody who lives here is—well, fairly prosperous. Retired cattlemen, men who have made money at mining, families that came here from the South after the war to find peace and security. The trail herds pass through the valley on their way to the shipping pens at Briscoe, but cowboys don't stop long in Domingo. There are no inducements; no saloons or dancehalls or gambling houses."

"How about that place at the end of the street—the Potluck?"

The color rose in her cheeks and he saw her eyes flash. "That will be done away with. At once. Cole Engle—"

The supper bell interrupted her, and Bradford walked with her into the dining room. There was a long table set for six, and they found Randolph Pierson awaiting them. Three men entered after they had seated themselves, spoke briefly to Pierson and the girl and went to eating. The meal was good, and Bradford felt a keen delight at sharing it with Nancy. The prospect of settling in the valley had suddenly become doubly attractive. Several times he heard the name of Cole Engle mentioned, but so absorbed in his companion was he that the significance of the others' conversation was lost to him.

She left him after supper, and he went to the veranda to smoke. Twilight was descending, and the mountain cast its shadow over the town. There was an hour or more of silence, then gradually Domingo seemed to awaken. Lights appeared and presently came the shuffle of feet and the thud of hoofs. Men passed the hotel on foot and on horseback, all headed towards the end of town where was located the Potluck; and Bradford became curious after a while and followed.

The Potluck was brightly lighted and there were horses at the hitchrail; he heard the hum of voices and the clink of glass and presently the soprano laugh of a woman. The piano jangled, and to the din was added the shuffle of dancing feet. He sat down on the steps of the darkened store and watched.

A band of horsemen came rattling up and halted before the place. Bradford counted six of them. "This the joint?" called one of the riders.

"Must be," came the answer. "Only joint in town that ain't dead."

A man slouched out of the darkness and into the circle of light cast by the overhead torches. "You fellers lookin' for Cole Engle?"

"That's the name."

"Come on in; he's expectin' you."

BRADFORD finished his cigarette, rolled and lighted another one. Aware of a keen desire to return to the hotel in the hope of finding Nancy there, he deliberately lingered. He must keep himself in hand until this freedom from gunplay and bloodletting had become assured; after that—well, he'd see! Heretofore the thought of marriage had never entered his head; he was a marked man who must of necessity play the lone wolf. Meeting Nancy Pierson had stirred something deep and dormant within him; once Texas Jack was safely buried there would be no limit to the dreams he might dream.

He was still sitting there when he saw a body of men cut diagonally across the street a hundred feet below him. They did not speak, and even in the darkness Bradford could sense their cold determination. There were seven of them, and when they reached the circle of light outside the Potluck he recognized their leader as Randolph Pierson. He saw them push through the swinging doors and got to his feet. Ten seconds later he entered the place.

They had stopped just inside the doorway, and at their entrance all activity had ceased. Pierson was speaking.

"I'm askin' you again, suh—where is Cole Engle?"

A bartender answered, "And I'm tellin' you again I don't know."

"He's somewhere about; find him for me."

Over their shoulders Bradford could see the man that sauntered around from the ell at the end of the bar. He was slender and dark and dressed all in black, with the frozen face and deliberate movements of the professional gambler. Leaning his right elbow on the bar, he raised a neatly booted foot to the rail and addressed the bartender. "Somebody asking for me, Tom?"

"I asked for you, suh," answered Pierson. "You were warned that a place like this would not be tolerated in Domingo. We're here to order you to close up and move your equipment elsewhere."

Engle regarded him with mocking eyes. "You're wasting your breath, Pierson. This town has slept long enough; it needs life. Men on the cattle drives are entitled to some fun; when they find they can get it here, they'll hurry back and spend their money in Domingo instead of Briscoe."

"The order, suh, will be obeyed; and within the next 24 hours."

A subtle change came over Engle; he didn't shift his position, but Bradford could sense the tensing of the man's muscles, could see the hardening of his eyes. He answered in a voice that was low but intense.

"Listen to sense, Pierson. You're a big frog in a mighty little puddle. You made the puddle, and it's been that ever since. I aim to make it a pond and attract a few fish. Suckers? Maybe; but there'll be a fair share of game fish with 'em, and you and the rest of the frogs will profit. I'm not closing up. Not now, or in 24 hours, or in that many years, and you and your fellow puddle jumpers can't make me."

Pierson took an angry stride forward. "Why, damn you, suh! I'll—"

"Don't start anything, Pierson! Better look around you first."

And at that moment Bradford felt a hard nudge against his spine and stiffened. Then he swore under his breath at the realization that he had been so absorbed in what was going on that he had not heard the movement behind him.

PIERSON stopped and glared about him, and his men also looked. Bradford didn't, because he knew very well what he would see. Those half-dozen men who had arrived an hour before had left by a rear door, circled the building and now held Pierson and his party under their guns.

Pierson turned to face Engle again. "Who are these men?"

"Employees of mine. They're paid to protect my interests and are quite capable of doing it. This is my claim, Pierson, and it's not going to be jumped. Show the gentleman out, boys."

There was a moment of strained silence; then Pierson spoke, his voice restrained. "You've tricked us, Engle, but the warning stands. Be out of Domingo within 24 hours or suffer the consequences."

A faint smile of scorn twisted Engle's lips. "You heard what I said. Your threats don't frighten me. I'm an old hand at this game and know how to take care of myself. Now get out."

Pierson glared at him in futile anger. There was nothing to do but withdraw as gracefully as was possible. He turned to his men. "The jackals have us at their mercy," he said quietly, and led the way from the room.

Bradford followed them out, an occasional poke in the ribs reminding him that his guard was still behind him. The others struck diagonally across the street, but he stopped at the edge of the walk and turned slowly to look at the man who covered him. The fellow was about his own size and build, but the light was behind him and Bradford could not see his face plainly. He knew, though, that Engle's man wore a mustache and was attired in an ornate cowboy rig that would distinguish him anywhere.

"Keep goin'," said the man, "and don't come back."

Bradford turned and went across the street to the store and sat down on the steps. He was angry with himself; angry and disgusted. He had come here in search of peace and quiet and had landed squarely in the midst of trouble. He must stay out of this mess at no matter what cost to his pride; for if he didn't, he would most certainly be recognized as Texas

Jack. And that meant that he must shake the dust of Domingo from his boots forever.

WHEN at last Bradford approached the hotel, he saw that the lobby was lighted and knew that Randolph Pierson and his clan were assembled there. A man was tying his horse at the hitchrail and ran up the steps when Bradford was still some yards away. He was but a vague shape in the darkness, and Bradford did not recognize him. Entering the lobby, John started quietly and unhurriedly for the stairway.

Every chair was occupied and Pierson was on his feet facing the man who had just entered. As he caught sight of Bradford, his face brightened. "Ah! Here's the gentleman

I was tellin' you about now. Nate, I want you to meet—"

The man turned swiftly. *"Texas Jack!* Texas Jack, as I live and breathe! You old son-of-a-gun, what brings you here?" He came forward with outstretched hand and Bradford experienced the sickening feeling that his game was played out.

There was a concerted gasp from the audience. "Texas Jack!" said Pierson sharply. "You mean to tell me, suh, that this man is Texas Jack?"

"He sure is!" Nate Crowley was pumping a limp hand. "We were Rangers together." He turned a beaming face to Pierson. "The very man we need, by grab! He'll fix Cole Engle's clock for him!"

They were all eagerness and excitement, getting from their chairs and crowding about Bradford, smiling, exclaiming, their eyes bright.

"Hold up a minute," said Bradford sharply. "I'm not mixed up in this thing and I don't intend to be."

The harsh announcement was like a dash of cold water. The warmness left them. Nate stared at him, frowning in perplexity. "You're not in it! You? First time I ever heard of Texas Jack duckin' a fight. What makes you think you ain't mixed up in this?"

"I'm through fighting other people's battles. I came here to settle down and raise a few cows and forget there ever was a man called Texas Jack. You've spoiled that for me, Nate, so tomorrow I'm moving along."

"But you can't do that!" protested Nate. "You can't run out on me like that. Good grief, man! I'm marshal of this town, and I need your help. I've been away checkin' up on this Cole Engle, hopin' to find somethin' that I could hold him for. But he's kept within the law. Run out of a dozen places for crooked gamblin' and worse, but nothin' to railroad him for. Now we've got to chase him out of Domingo."

"You can handle the job alone, Nate; you don't need my help. I'm pulling out tomorrow." It was final; he knew it, and they knew it. The curt nod he gave them was not answered; they just stared gloomily after him as he mounted the stairs. Half way up he faltered for an instant. Nancy Pierson was waiting at the top, leaning against the balustrade. Her blue eyes were on him, and by the dim hall light he saw that they were troubled. He gave her a formal inclination of the head and was about to step past her when she touched him on the arm. He turned and looked down at her.

NANCY PIERSON

JOHN BRADFORD

Her fingertips remained on his sleeve and for a heartbeat or two she seemed uncertain how to begin. "I—heard what you said downstairs. I hope you'll reconsider."

"Why should I?"

"Because they need you." The words came swiftly now. "They've built Domingo the way they wanted it and they've kept it that way. Now this man Engle is going to ruin it for them. He's bringing in men—gunmen. That's why, when you first came—"

"You thought I was one of them."

"Yes. I've already apologized for that. Now you must help us."

"You don't need me. Nate Crowley is a good man. I've worked with him. He can deal with Engle. One man more or less won't make any difference."

"When that man is Texas Jack he'd make all the difference in the world. Everyone in the West has heard of you; just the knowledge that you're with us would start Engle on his way. Surely you must know that!"

IT WAS hard to steel himself against her; harder because he knew well how to handle men like Cole Engle. His method was daring and utterly ruthless, but it had worked before and it would work again, with any kind of luck. That was the rub—luck. His, he felt in his bones, had run out. In the last cleanup they had nearly got him; now, if he entered into this thing, another gang would be after his blood, driven by the knowledge that the man who killed Texas Jack would become as famous as had Pat Garrett when he finished Billy the Kid.

It would be foolish to say that he did not fear death. He did fear it, just as he had feared some of the tough outlaws it had been his duty to hunt down and exterminate; but as long as his lawman's oath had sent him after them, he had thrust that fear into the background. Now he had tasted a freedom that was new to him, and he was reluctant to relinquish it. Also he was a man who, once a decision was made, would cling inexorably to it. For years he had set his eyes on the goal he was approaching, and to swerve from the path now was almost unthinkable.

Suppose he threw his lot in with that of Randolph Pierson. The blue eyes into which he gazed held a promise that was most dazzling. This girl, he knew, had been attracted to him just as strongly as he had been drawn to her; he felt deep within him that if he were to champion her cause he could win a love that was strong and abiding. But to awaken a love that in the end must be denied was criminal. As John Bradford he could ask her to marry him and share his fate, but not as Texas Jack; for the wife of Texas Jack might easily be made a widow within the hour she had become a bride. It was better to break off now before the spark of attraction had flamed; better even to kill that spark in its kindling.

"I'm leaving in the morning," he said firmly. "It's important that I go—very important."

The light went out of her face, and he knew she did not believe him. She made a little gesture of hopelessness. "Very well. I might have known that you couldn't possibly be interested in the affairs of our little town. I'm sorry I mentioned the matter." She turned and ran down the stairs without giving him a chance to speak. Her lips were tightly compressed and he thought he could see the sheen of tears on her lashes.

He went into his room and sat down by the open window. For the life of him he couldn't see how he might have decided otherwise. Nate Crowley was a good officer and could surely gather enough men to deal with Engle. And if they failed to drive Engle out, Pierson and the rest of them would in time learn to tolerate the Potluck. One didn't need to become soiled just because there happened to be a mudhole at one end of the garden. Perhaps when the thing was settled and Texas Jack was once more lost in obscurity, he could come back and try to make Nancy understand.

SOMEBODY came upstairs and knocked on his door and he said, "Come in." The door opened and closed, and for an instant he had a glimpse of Crowley's bulk against the light in the hall. Nate came over and sat down on the bed.

"Reckon I'm a bit thickheaded, Jack, but I just can't figure what ails you. Time was when you'd jump at a chance like this. Come on; get your guns, and let's you and me go down there and start that Engle runnin'."

"You're not thickheaded, Nate, you're deaf. I said I was through fighting other people's battles."

"Yeah, I know; but cripes, Jack, this ain't just some stranger's war, it's mine! I'm marshal of this burg and I'm proud of the job. If Engle was just the ordinary type of gambler and honkytonk owner it wouldn't be so bad. But I've been checkin' up on him, and he's bad. He can sling a gun, but he's too slick to do his killin' himself. He hires it done and he covers up so well that it can't be proved against him. Just the same, he's a real murderer as sure as you're a foot high, and I've got to get him."

"You've got a dozen men—"

"I don't want a dozen men. Or two dozen men. I want you! Gosh, Jack, when I think how you and me used to clean up places! Come on; you can't stay in hidin'. I let the

cat out of the bag unknowin', and word that Texas Jack's in town has probably reached Engle already. You always were in favor of strikin' while the iron's hot, and it's sizzlin' right now. Come on."

He got up and took Bradford by the arm, but John did not budge.

"No use, Nate. I'm out. Listen. Sit down. You know that men in our business get hunches when they've lost their luck. You've seen it happen a dozen times. There was Bill Withers; remember when the Cap sent him out on his last assignment? You could see in his eyes that he knew his number was up. He never came back. The same with Sandy Hale. Nate, I got that hunch myself. I might pull through once, maybe twice; but as sure as I remain Texas Jack the ace of spades is up."

Nate made an impatient gesture. "Jack, you're talkin' like a sissy. I've had the same feelin' myself. Everybody has at one time or another. It's just a frame of mind. Go into anything with the feelin' that you're licked, and you are licked. I tell you, when your number's up, it's up regardless what you think or feel. For every man that got his when he thought he was licked, there's a dozen that get it without such a thought in their heads."

Bradford did not answer, and Nate knew that he was not to be moved. He got up. "So this Cole Engle got you scared, huh?"

"You know better than that. I said I was through and I meant it. I was a long time getting to the point where I could make the break, and now that I've made it, it'll take more than the opening of a honkeytonk to turn me back. You can call on enough men to handle this thing without dragging me into it."

"I don't depend on numbers, and you never did either. The two of us could work it fine, but you won't help. All right. Be stubborn about it. Sit there on your britches and chew your cud. Like you say, it ain't none of your business, and the fact that a feller who used to be your buddy is in a tight place don't count neither. I'll settle with Engle myself."

He strode angrily to the door, and Bradford got up with a, "Wait a minute, Nate!" But Crowley went out and slammed the door.

BRADFORD swore. Fate seemed determined to drag him into this affair. First Pierson, then Nancy, now Nate. And they had all made him feel a bit ashamed of himself; they had put it up to him as though he were the sole means of their salvation. Damn! He was no superman. Crowley was just as experienced, just as good a shot, every bit as courageous. He'd be able to handle Engle alone.

He heard the thump of Crowley's boots on the stairs, heard him stalk through the lobby and to the street. Bradford smoked a cigarette, then sat on the bed and pulled off his boots. He'd leave the first thing in the morning, and if he never saw Domingo again it would be soon enough.

From some distance up the street came a shot, then quickly a second one. Bradford came to his feet, tense and listening. He heard a stir in the lobby below and the concerted rush of feet towards the door. Pierson and his companions went outside, and he heard them running towards the Potluck.

He moved swiftly to the window, threw it open and looked out. Far up the street he could see the blazing torches above the doorway to the Potluck, but the inside of the place had been darkened. There were horses at the hitchrack, but no men within the circle of light. Bradford went back to the bed and pulled on his boots; then he snatched up his gunbelts and ran down the stairs, buckling them in place on his way. He had forgotten that he didn't want to mix in fights.

The lobby was deserted, but Nancy stood on the veranda looking up the street. "What is it?" he asked sharply.

"I don't know." She was looking towards a shadowy figure which came striding jerkily along the sidewalk. She recognized the man when he drew near. "What happened, George?"

The man halted and peered through the darkness at them. "Nate Crowley," he said, his voice vibrating with excitement. "I was in the Potluck when he came in. He walked up to Cole Engle and told him he was under arrest. 'What for?' said Engle. 'Spittin' on the sidewalk,' said Nate. 'Come along.' Then somebody shot him. Twice. Through a window."

BRADFORD started down the steps. "Where are you going?" cried Nancy, but he just made a motion with his hand and strode swiftly towards the Potluck. Nate had made a fatal error. Stung by Bradford's refusal to help him, he had rushed into the Potluck without first scouting the place to lo-

cate its danger points. Engle had posted guards outside, and one of them had shot Nate.

Pierson and his men were moving about just beyond the patch of light from the torches, and as Bradford joined them a voice came from within the saloon. It was the voice of Cole Engle.

"Listen, Pierson! Your marshal came in here looking for trouble, and somebody shot him through a window. He's badly hurt. You can send a couple of your men in after him, but they must leave their guns outside."

Bradford saw Pierson turn and look towards the building. For some ten seconds there, his stern profile sharp against the light, and Bradford could sense what was passing through his mind. He wanted to charge the place in force, to fight it out hand to hand, to exterminate or be exterminated; but his better judgment prevailed. His tall figure slumped and he turned to the man beside him. "Come on, Will," he said in a choked voice, and swiftly unbuckled his gun belt and gave it to another.

They crossed the street and entered the Potluck. A light flared briefly and then died. For a space there was complete silence; then the doors parted and through them pushed the two men bearing the stricken Nate Crowley. Other hands eased their burden, and for a brief moment they halted in the middle of the street.

"Engle didn't shoot him," announced Pierson tightly. "George Rynders saw it and told us so. And the window pane is gone where the bullet came through. Nate's hard hit, but alive; when he's able to talk he may have somethin' to tell us. We'll take him to the hotel."

They moved slowly along the street, Bradford following. Nancy was waiting on the hotel veranda, and ran ahead of them to open the door. They carried Nate upstairs and laid him on a bed, then milled about helplessly while Pierson attempted some kind of examination.

Bradford shouldered through them to the bedside. "Clear out, all of you. I'll take care of him."

Pierson looked up at him, frowning. "I reckon, suh, we can manage without you."

"I said I'd take care of him. You can help. Miss Nancy, fetch hot water and clean cloths. If you have any kind of disinfectant, fetch that, too. The rest of you go downstairs where you won't be in the way."

He started working on one of Crowley's boots and Pierson, after a long hard glance, nodded to the men and they filed out. Nancy had already gone.

"It seems to me, suh," said Pierson as he tugged at the other boot, "that for one so uninterested, you're assuming a lot of authority."

"Maybe. But remember that from here on I'm Texas Jack and in full charge. The sooner you realize that, the better we'll get along."

By the time they had Nate undressed and covered, Nancy arrived with a kettle of hot water and an armful of white muslin. He spoke to her crisply. "If you think you can stand it, we can use you; if you're inclined to be squeamish, you'd better go."

"I'll stay."

BRADFORD took off his coat, rolled up his sleeves and washed his hands carefully and thoroughly. The bullet had gone into Nate's back and had stopped against a rib. It was a job for a surgeon, but there was none within a hundred miles. He gave her his knife and told her to boil it, then prepared Nate as best he could for the ordeal. There was no anesthetic.

He had to cut from the front to get at the bullet, and the pain roused Nate from unconsciousness. "Hold his right arm, Pierson," ordered Bradford. "You hold his left, Miss Nancy. Nate, you old hyena, keep still."

It seemed heartless to Nancy, but she knew there was no other way. The sweat broke out on Crowley's forehead, and cries of pain were torn from his lips as the keen knife cut through living flesh. His hand crushed Nancy's until she thought the bones would break. From the tortured face of the marshal her gaze went to that of Bradford, and she saw that he was suffering just as much as was Nate. His face was drawn and white, the muscles of his neck swelled, the sweat dripped from his chin; but in his hard eyes she read inflexible purpose. And at last the bullet was out.

"It's over, Nate," he said; but Crowley had fainted.

Bradford worked swiftly, skillfully, applying compresses and bandages.

"That's it," he said at last. "Got to keep him warm now, and as quiet as possible. It'll be touch and go for a while. Pierson, take this mess downstairs." He rolled down his sleeves and put on his coat. Pierson tiptoed out with the kettle and soiled cloths, and Nancy came over to Bradford and put her fingers on his arm.

"It was a wonderful thing," she said quietly. "Nobody else could have done it. But for you he would have died."

"But for me," he told her bitterly, "he wouldn't have been shot."

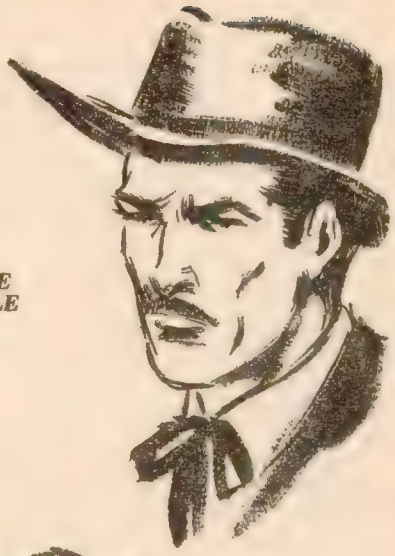
"I don't think you should say that. I've been thinking things over since I ran away from you out there in the hall. At first it seemed unbelievable that a man like Texas Jack should try to avoid trouble; now I know that it takes more courage for a brave man to back out of a fight than a coward. And you had tried so hard to hide your identity."

He gave her a grateful look. "Thank you, Nancy. Now you'd better get some sleep. This hasn't been easy for you."

"How about you? I watched while you worked. That knife hurt you more than it did poor Nate. Let me watch through the night."

The smile he gave her was very tender. "We'll watch together. I'll fetch my blankets and spread them on the floor and we can relieve each other. Maybe you'd better heat some water and fill several bottles. We've got to keep him warm."

Neither of them got much sleep. Nate developed a fever and became restless, and they were forced to work with him almost continually. It was not until four o'clock in the morning that he finally quieted; and then, at Bradford's insistence, Nancy curled up on the blankets.



COLE ENGLE

RANDOLPH PIERSON

WHEN she awoke it was daylight, and Bradford was seated in the chair by the bed. She started up with an exclamation of reproach which was smothered instantly at his warning signal. He came softly over to her. "He's sleeping. I think we can both turn in now. Your uncle can sit with him. Nate's tough as nails; he'll be all right in a few days."

He extended his hand and helped her to her feet, and for several seconds their fingers clung. With an effort he withdrew his hand and turned away. He was Texas Jack again, and must remember it for her sake.

He went down to the kitchen and found some lukewarm coffee and drank two cups of it. As he was leaving, Nancy entered. "If you'll wait a minute, John, I'll get you some warm breakfast," she said.

The use of his first name thrilled him. "Don't bother; there's something I must do first. Where can I find this man George Rynders?"

Her eyes clouded. "What are you going to do?"

"He may have seen the man who shot Nate. Where is he?"

"He works at the store across from Engle's place."

Bradford went out into the sunshine. The street was deserted and it was hard to believe that just a few hours before there had been confusion and shooting and bloodshed. The Potluck was silent, but Bradford studied it as he approached. Behind those walls men were posted, and by this time they knew that he was Texas Jack. But if this were so, they would also know that he had refused Pierson his help. He went into the store and found the man he wanted behind the counter and alone.

"Rynders? I'm Texas Jack. Who shot Nate Crowley?"

The man's eyes bugged. "I—I don't know. The shot came through a window. I didn't see who fired it."

"How long had you been inside before it happened?"

"Not more than five minutes. I'd just come in. Engle was at the end of the bar. Nate walked up to him and—"

"When you came in did you notice any men hanging around outside?"

"Yes. There were two fellows standing at the right hand corner. They were strangers, but the one nearest the corner stood out like a bonfire on a black night. He was about your build, but wore sideburns and a black mustache. Had on a big white hat and a buckskin vest with fringes and conchas. You could spot him a mile away."

"I know him." It was the man who had held his gun against Bradford's spine. "And he was nearest the corner—nearest the window the bullet went through?"

"Yes. But there might have been another at the side of the saloon."

Bradford went back to the hotel. Nate had been shot at Engle's signal, he was sure. And he was pretty certain that the man with the buckskin vest had done the actual shooting. Both men were potential murderers.

He stopped in to see how Crowley was doing and found Pierson sitting by the bed. Nancy, Pierson said, was resting. Nate still slept. "Let me know if he wakes up," Bradford said, and went to his room.

PARTLY undressing, he lay down and was soon asleep. He awakened around noon to find Nancy watching Nate. The latter was still sleeping so he went downstairs to dinner. The three men who had eaten there the day before were present once more, as also was Pierson; but now they nodded to him in a friendly fashion, and he assumed that Pierson had told them of the operation.

"You figured out a way to rid Domingo of Engle?" one of them asked, and Bradford told them that he was thinking about it.

He went to Crowley's room and sent Nancy down to her dinner, then hung his gunbelts and hat on a chair and sat down by the patient. And presently Crowley opened his eyes and looked at him.

"Number—not up—yet," said Nate weakly.

"Reckon not, Nate. You're too tough to kill. Who shot you?"

"Big white hat—fancy vest. Turned when he shot me—saw him."

"Uh-huh." That settled it. "How about some broth?"

Crowley nodded, and Bradford went downstairs and got it for him. He ate a few spoonfuls, then dropped into a doze. The afternoon passed, and Nancy came in to relieve Bradford, but he sent her away until supper time. The same three shared the meal with himself and Pierson, and when they had finished he spoke briefly.

Gather your men quietly and have them drift to the far end of town after dark. Beyond the Potluck and far enough away that they won't be seen."

Eyes brightened. "Your plan, suh?" inquired Pierson.

"Tell you later. Just do as I say."

He went out on the veranda and sat down to smoke, leaving it up to Pierson to relieve Nancy. Dusk fell swiftly and lights began to appear. Then he heard a soft footstep behind him and turned to see Nancy standing in the doorway. He got up, and she came quite close to him and looked up into his face.

"Uncle Randolph told me you're planning something against Engle."

"Yes. Nancy, Cole Engle planned to have Nate murdered, and a fellow in a buckskin vest did the shooting. It can't be proved, so the law can't touch them. But they're guilty as sure as fate and they must pay."

Nancy's voice trembled with emotion. "Nate talked with me this evening. He said he was sorry he had dragged you into it—told me about your hunch that—oh, John, I'm afraid!"

She swayed towards him, and he put both hands on her shoulders, repressing the desire to gather her into his arms. "Steady!" he said, and as she braced herself, took his hands away. "Nate's a bit lightheaded," he said and then turned away because he knew that if he

remained another second he'd do the thing that would make it impossible for him ever to face Cole Engle and the man who had shot Crowley.

"John, wait! Don't go!"

He was striding down the steps. The spark was burning. So kill it!

"Sorry," he called over his shoulder. "See you later. Nothing to worry about." He hurried around the corner, her desperate, "Please, John! Please!" following him. His face was tight and the sweat was on his forehead as he turned into the alley.

He came to the store and sat down on the back step to roll a cigarette with fingers that shook. It was love, he knew now—love that turned rich blood to water and strong muscles to flaccid flesh. But she must never know. For if things went tonight as he hoped they would, the name of Texas Jack would flame anew throughout the West, and more hands than ever would be raised against him.

WHEN it was quite dark he got up, and moving along the side of the store, stopped at a front corner and looked over at the Potluck. The place was brightly lighted again, but the hitchrack in front was empty. At the corner of the saloon, to his left and just beyond the half circle of light from the door flares, was a man, and at the corner to his right were two more. One of the latter wore a big white hat and a buckskin vest decorated with fringes. Bradford returned to the alley and circled in search of Pierson and his men. He found them at one side of the road 100 yards from the Potluck.

"Pierson, I want you and another man to come with me," he said.

He led them directly towards the side of the saloon, halting them some 50 yards away. "Stay here," he whispered, "and wait." Then he moved silently away and did not stop until he was 30 feet from the Potluck. Here he crouched, waiting.

The man with the buckskin vest and his companion were now the only two Engle men in sight, although Bradford judged that one or two others were at the back of the building. For ten or fifteen minutes he waited; then he saw the one with the buckskin vest move along the side of the place, while the other turned to the front of the saloon and put his back against the wall.

He of the buckskin vest ducked under one lighted window, then squatted on his heels beneath the one with the broken pane, his cigarette end glowing in the darkness. Down on his stomach went Bradford, to start worming his way forward with the stealth of an Indian. He moved a foot at a time at first, then by inches. When he was at the very edge of the shaft of light which streamed through the window, he got to his knees and thrust a gun into the radiance.

"Not a peep!" he whispered sharply.

He heard a gasp and saw the glowing end of the cigarette drop to the ground. "Up with them!" he ordered. There was no movement. "It's Texas Jack," he said grimly. "You better get 'em up—fast!"

When the other obeyed, he got up and went over to him and jerked the other's gun from its holster. "Come along—quick and quiet," he said.

He marched the man to where Pierson and his companion were waiting. "Hang on to him. He's the one who shot Nate. I'm going after Engle now. One of you better bring up the boys and post them about the place." He vanished in the darkness before they could question him.

He walked to the road, then turned along it and walked directly towards the entrance to the Potluck. As he came into the circle of light the two guards in the front stiffened, but he strode boldly to the swinging doors and pushed between them and into the place.

There were eight men in the room. One was behind the bar, a second was dealing solitaire at the faro table, another idly spun the roulette wheel. Four more were playing poker at the round table, and Cole Engle stood at the end of the bar. Just where he had been standing when Nate tackled him, thought Bradford; right in line with the window beneath which the man in the buckskin vest had been crouching.

They all stared at him, and the four at the poker table hitched their chairs slightly; but Bradford simply gave them a cool nod and ordered a drink. As he poured it, he looked beneath his lids into the backbar mirror. Engle was staring steadily at the window; the four at the poker table gradually resumed their former positions, and he heard one of them say, "I'll open."

THE bartender moved away, nervously wiping the counter, and Bradford spoke through the side of his mouth and in so low a tone that none but Engle could hear.

"Engle, you had Nate Crowley shot and God knows how many more besides him. I always give a man warning before I kill him. Yank your gun, you fourflushing murderer!"

With the words he pivoted. And now Cole Engle was anything but the suave, nerveless gangster he had been when the odds were in his favor. His eyes bulged as he stared towards the window, and from his lips came a frantic scream, "Ed! Where in hell are you?" Then, in sheer desperation, his right hand flew to the holster he wore under his left arm, and the buttons popped from his black frock coat as he jerked it open.

Bradford waited until he had the gun clear before he fired; and at the crash of the shot Engle screamed, spun about and fell heavily against the bar.

Bradford leaped towards the broken window and whirled with his back to the wall just beside it. Both guns were out now and the right one covered the four at the poker table. "Hold it!" he cried sharply, and they froze, half turned in their chairs or on their way to their feet.

The front doors burst inward, and Bradford's left gun flamed, sending the splinters flying; and the man who had started in snapped a hasty shot and leaped out of range. The left gun swung upward, roared again, and one of the hanging lamps started swinging crazily, oil spurting from its punctured tank and dripping to the floor below. Another shot and the burner exploded. The oil caught fire—dripped into the pool beneath. With a faint *woosh* that flamed also.

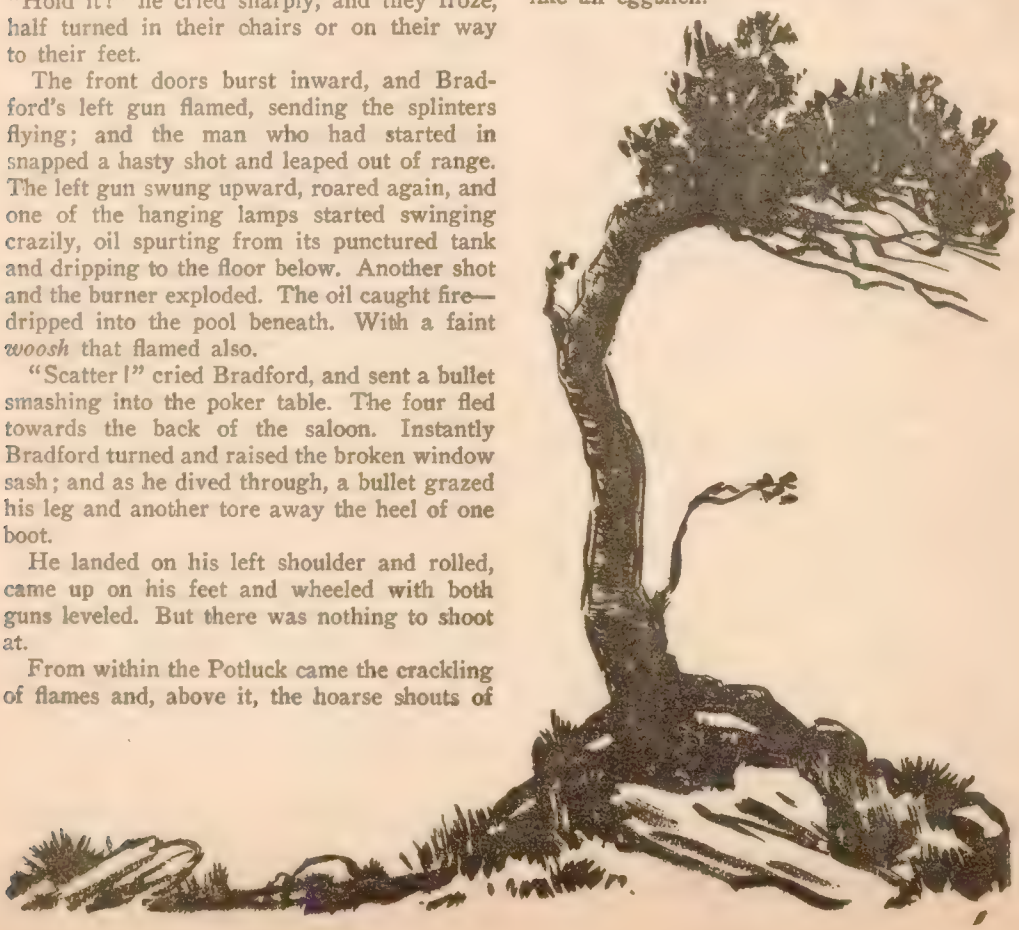
"Scatter!" cried Bradford, and sent a bullet smashing into the poker table. The four fled towards the back of the saloon. Instantly Bradford turned and raised the broken window sash; and as he dived through, a bullet grazed his leg and another tore away the heel of one boot.

He landed on his left shoulder and rolled, came up on his feet and wheeled with both guns leveled. But there was nothing to shoot at.

From within the Potluck came the crackling of flames and, above it, the hoarse shouts of men and the shriller screams of women. Outside, Rebel yells sounded as Pierson and his men ran to surround the place. From the rear, figures came scurrying into the open like rats flushed from their nests, and Bradford knew that the Potluck was emptying its human freight into the night. Gunmen and tinhorns and dancehall dollies would not trouble Domingo again.

The inside of the saloon was a raging furnace now—a fitting funeral pyre for the man who had built it. Bradford turned and strode back to where he had turned his prisoner over to Pierson and the man called Will. Pierson, he knew, had gone with his men, but the other would still have the fellow with the buckskin vest in his custody.

He failed to find him and called "Will!" sharply without getting an answer. Then he stumbled over a prostrate figure and, kneeling, flicked a match into flame. The man lay on his face, the back of his head smashed in like an eggshell.



It was Will. The man with the buckskin vest was gone.

BRADFORD sought out Randolph Pierson and told him what had happened.

"I shouldn't have left him alone with that fellow," said Pierson. "I went after the men as you directed, but the fellow had been disarmed, and Will had him covered. When the excitement started, Will must have relaxed his vigilance for an instant."

"Start your men hunting for the killer. Let the others go."

Bradford turned away to start a search of his own. The place where the dead Will lay was now brightly lighted by the flames, and from it he followed a faint trail to the stable behind the Potluck; but others had escaped on horseback, and the prints of shod hoofs were many. Which of them had been made by the horse ridden by the killer Engle had called "Ed", he had no means of knowing. He examined all outbuildings and possible hiding places surrounding the town without success, and finally returned to the hotel.

The figure which came down the steps to meet him was but a vague shadow.

"John! Is it you? Oh, John, are you all right?" Nancy stopped before him, both hands gripping his arms.

"Not a scratch," he lied.

"But you're limping!"

"Lost a boot heel somewhere."

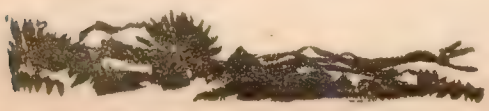
"I'm so glad!" She sagged weakly against him. His arms went about her hungrily, and for one bittersweet moment he held her close. Then he stepped back, supporting her by the arms.

"Come over to the steps and I'll tell you about it."

She seated herself, and when he would have remained standing, motioned for him to sit beside her. He spoke slowly, keeping all emotion out of his voice.

"And now it's finished," she said. "The Potluck's gone, Engle's dead and his men are scattered. Oh, I'm so glad!"

"The Potluck's gone and Engle's dead," he said gravely, "but it isn't finished. There's the man in the buckskin vest—the one called Ed."



"He'll never trouble us again. We can forget him."

"Not so easily. Nate won't forget him. And this man Will—he was married?"

"Yes."

"Every time you look at his widow or his children, if he has any, you'll remember the man in the buckskin vest. No, Nancy, we can't forget him."

"But surely you won't go out of your way to hunt for him. You don't know which way he went or where he'll stop. It would be a waste of time. And if you did happen to find him—! He's dangerous, John. A killer!"

"That's why we must find him. A man like that on the loose is like a tiger that's tasted blood. He'll kill again at the slightest excuse, for he knows that he'll be hanged just as high for one murder as for six. You can't reform a killer any more than you can tame a tiger that's tasted human blood."

"But there are officers of the law to hunt him down. You have too much at stake to do it. Nate explained it to me this afternoon—how every gunman in the West would sell his soul for the chance to kill Texas Jack! And sooner or later one of them will succeed. You, yourself, said your luck had run out. Oh, don't you see? You must get rid of Texas Jack. If you're ever to have any peace or security or happiness you *must!*"

HE SAT for a short space staring out into the dark. She had spoken the truth; unless he could lose his identity as Texas Jack they would hound him until they got him. And he knew his luck couldn't last.

This girl beside him loved him; he knew it and was proud and glad, and for a moment a dazzling future with her beckoned to him. He was no longer an officer, he was not bound by an oath to hunt down this killer. He could slip out of Domingo and once more lose Texas Jack somewhere along the trail; and then, when Texas Jack had become but a memory, he could send for her, and as Mr. and Mrs. John Bradford they could live their lives to the full.

But could they? At Domingo he had thought himself safe, only to be identified as Texas Jack in a matter of hours. His fame had reached to the remotest part of the country, and sooner or later another Nate Crowley would resurrect Texas Jack and bring the horde of avengers and notoriety seekers down

on him again. No; there was but one escape for Texas Jack, he gloomily concluded, and that was in death!

Nancy stirred and he felt the warm pressure of her shoulder. He got to his feet. "Reckon I'd better take a look at Nate."

She got up and stood on the step above him, her eyes level with his.

"You're going after him, aren't you?"

"Yes."

For another few seconds she stood there looking at him; then she turned and slowly went up the steps and into the hotel. Her figure had lost its grace and she walked as though she was infinitely weary.

Bradford sat down and rolled a cigarette. He had made the only choice possible. The man in the buckskin vest had killed Will, had nearly killed Nate Crowley, and would have killed Bradford himself if the chance came his way. Texas Jack could bring him to book if any man could. It was a moral obligation which he could not dodge.

He looked in at Nate and found him sleeping, then went to his own room and to bed. At dawn he was up before anybody else was astir.

At noon he came into dinner. Pierson and his three companions were exultant and grateful, but he said little and left as soon as he had eaten. This time he took his blanket roll and stopped at the store to buy some saddle rations. That afternoon he started searching the mountains on the west in the hope that Buckskin Ed—as he had named the man in his thoughts—was hiding nearby, waiting for a shot at him. He spent the night in the hills and continued the search another full day, then returned to Domingo. Nate's wound would require dressing, and he was anxious to know how he was doing.

THERE was nobody in the lobby, and he went upstairs and to Nate's room. The door was open and Nancy was seated by Crowley's bed. She turned as he came in, and for an instant he saw a face that was white and drawn and eyes haunted with fear; then she recognized him and all the worry and care seemed to drop from her. She started to her feet with a glad, "John!" and if he had never realized it before, he knew now the depth of her love.

"Hello, Nancy," he said, and his eyes must have told her what his lips would not. "How are you making it, Nate?"

"Fine as frog's hair. You sure did a good job on me. Come over here a minute; I want to ask somethin' of you. About this feller in the buckskin vest. He's my meat, Jack. I want your promise to leave him for me."

Bradford looked at him, then at the girl. Nate had seen how it was between them and was trying to forestall a meeting between him and Buckskin Ed.

"The way it's shaping up, you won't need my promise. I haven't the slightest idea where to find him." He added, "Some hot water and bandages, Nancy, please."

When she had gone Nate spoke plainly. "You fool! Can't you see she's eatin' her heart out for you?"

"Shut up. Of course I can see it. How do you think I feel? And what kind of a louse would I be if I took advantage of it, knowing that an hour after I married her she might be a widow." He washed his hands, while Nate lay there frowning. "Turn over and let me take a look at that hole."

Nancy returned to help him dress the wound, and since Nate required no watching now, they went out on the veranda and sat in the shadows. Presently he felt her hand touch his fingers and gently clasped it within his own. Neither spoke; their hearts were too full for words. And after a long while Pierson came hustling up on the steps, peered through the darkness at them and said, "I'd like to speak to you a moment before you go upstairs, Jack," and they went into the hotel together.

With an exchange of goodnights, Nancy went to her room. Bradford turned to Pierson. The latter was behind the desk and he held a letter in his hand. "This came on the evenin' stage," he said, and handed it over.

Bradford glanced at the postmark and, wondering who could be writing to him from Briscoe, opened and read it. It was brief.

> Texas Jack—I got a score to settle with you and maybe you figure you got one to settle with me. If you're half the man folks think you are you'll meet me and have it over with.
>
> I wouldn't stand a chance in Domingo, but in Briscoe nobody knows us. Give your name at the Blue Front and you'll find out where to meet me.
>
> Edward Engle (Cole's brother).

Cole Engle's brother! That explained the man's thirst for revenge. It wasn't just a play for notoriety, it went deeper than that.

Bradford spoke tersely. "It's from the killer. His name is Edward Engle and he's Cole's brother." He turned and walked quickly from the room, ignoring Pierson's arresting cry. The latter followed him to the stable.

"Where is he? Tell me that!"

Bradford went about rigging his horse. "I can't tell you, Pierson. We're to meet man to man and settle it. If my luck holds I'll be back; if it doesn't—" He shrugged. "If it doesn't, that'll be the end of Texas Jack."

"But Nancy, man! The child loves you. What'll I tell her?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing. If I don't come back, let her think that I—just rode away. That's best for both of us."

He swung into the saddle and headed for Briscoe.

PIERSON went back into the hotel to find Nancy coming down the stairs. She had thrown a dressing gown over her shoulders, and fear and apprehension were in her face. "That was John who rode away, wasn't it? Where is he going at this time of the night?"

"Child, I don't know. He didn't say. He—he must have got a hunch where this Ed Engle is hidin'."

"Engle! Where did you learn his name?"

It was hard for Pierson to lie to anyone, impossible to lie to this niece whom he loved. "He had a letter from the fellow."

"And he's gone to meet him! Where, Uncle Randolph? Where?"

"I don't know."

"But this letter—where was it from?"

"It was postmarked Briscoe; but that means nothin'."

Her slight form stiffened and he saw the white face set with determination. "Hitch up the buckboard, Uncle Randolph; we're going after him."

"But, child—!"

"Please, Uncle Randolph! If you don't, I'll go alone. I must! Oh, don't you see? I love him! I must go! I must!" She turned and ran up the steps, and after a short space Pierson sighed despairingly and went out to the stable.

BRADFORD rode swiftly. Briscoe, he knew, lay to the north but he wasn't sure of the distance. He rode with a heart that was heavy with foreboding and a reluctance which was the beginning of fear. This, he thought, is how a man must feel on his way to the gallows. As the miles sped by, dread was replaced by stolid resignation. There was no use bucking Fate; if his luck had indeed run out, Texas Jack must die. The important thing now was to see that he died as he had lived, calmly and unafraid.

Texas Jack must die! The words kept echoing in his mind. Certainly as Texas Jack he could never bring to fruition the love between him and Nancy. To make her his, only to lose her, would be the ultimate in calamity.

He resolutely shook thoughts of her from him and turned to Buckskin Ed Engle. He had seen the man only twice and both times in the darkness, but he would know him at once. Even without the long sideburns and coarse black mustache, that ornate outfit would identify him. No, there would be no mistaking Ed Engle when they met.

He sighted Briscoe in the early dawn, and the sun was up when he rode into the town. It was a cattle-trail town, wild and woolly, where men died violent deaths and were put to rest on Boot Hill with but a grumble on the part of the gravediggers for the labor they had caused. He located the Blue Front and went inside to find a swamper and a yawning bartender the only occupants.

"I'm Texas Jack," he announced quietly.

The bartender closed his mouth and gazed at him interestedly. "Oh, yeah. Feller named Engle was talkin' about you. Some bragger, Engle. Said he was goin' to kill you and plant you on Boot Hill. Must really think so, for he got a spade and dug the grave." He opened the money till, took out an envelope and slid it across the bar to Bradford. Bradford opened it with steady fingers and read it

> Climb the hill to the west of town. Come alone or you won't find me. Have you the guts or are you just a four-flusher?
>
> Engle.

Bradford put the note into a pocket and went outside. For a while he stood in the early sunlight, a faraway expression on his face; then he crossed the street to the store and went inside. He made a few purchases, put them in his saddlebags and set out for the hill west of town.

He came at last to the summit and found himself on a rocky plateau; and as he halted to glance about him, a man on its far side got up from the boulder on which he had

been seated, and Bradford saw him throw out the cylinder of his Colt and glance briefly at its contents.

Bradford got down and grounded the reins. He didn't look at his own guns, for he knew they were loaded and would not fail him. There was no feeling in him now, no fear or reluctance or anxiety. He was a cold, methodical machine. He started towards Engle, walking steadily, his gaze on the other, stepping a bit high so as not to stumble.

Engle advanced at the same time and they neared each other like two wary cougars, each tensed to meet any move the other might make. The distance shortened to 100 feet, but neither man made a move for his gun. Then 75 feet—50. Each was mentally telling himself, "I've got to be sure. At the best there'll be time for only one shot. Got to make it good."

At 25 feet Ed Engle made his move. It was the swiftest draw Bradford had ever faced; he realized it in one sickening instant as his own gun whipped up. He drew only the right one, and the weapons roared in unison.

Both men rocked to the impact of lead, and Bradford fired a second shot; but he was blind and the bullet went wild. He fell forward on his face and lay still. Engle swayed on his feet. With an effort he steadied himself and raised his Colt slowly as though to send another slug into the inert body before him; then he shook his head from side to side, the gun arm sagged and he settled to his knees and gently toppled over as though to sleep.

THE sun was high when the Pierson buckboard halted before Briscoe's general store. Randolph Pierson got wearily from the seat and helped Nancy over the wheel. Her eyes were dark pools of misery in a stark white face. They went into the store.

Yes, the man they sought had been there that morning. Where had he gone? The storekeeper didn't know, but he had come from the Blue Front. They went out to the buckboard, and Nancy waited while her uncle made his inquiries. He returned in a few minutes.

"John was there. The bartender had a letter for him from Engle. He didn't know what it said, but Engle bragged that he was goin' to get Texas Jack." He cleared his throat. "He was so sure of it that he dug a grave on Boot Hill."

Nancy did not answer. She too was numb. Texas Jack's luck had run out; he knew it and she knew it. All through the night she had schooled herself to accept it. John's certainty of it had been reflected in his actions; she knew that he loved her with all the passionate strength of a man who loves but once, yet not an endearing word had he given her, and his arms had gone about her only to support her.

"We'll go to the hotel," said Pierson. "You can wait in the lobby while I look around."

She permitted him to lead her into the place and obediently seated herself in a chair which he turned to the window. He went out, and she sat there staring unseeingly into the street. At the end of an hour he was back looking wearier, older. "No use, child. He's gone to meet Engle somewhere, there's no doubt of it. The whole town's talkin' of Engle's brag. I—I guess we'd better eat a bite."

And then there came a shout and men started to move towards the end of the street. Pierson went to the door, looked in the direction in which they were headed, then turned back smothering a groan. "We'd better go out to the dining room, dear," he said.

She shook her head stiffly, impatiently, her eyes going to the left of the window. Men passed, looking over their shoulders as they walked. A horse came into view, then the rider. He sagged in the saddle as though weak or weary, and there was a bloodstained bandage about his head. Nancy had never seen Ed Engle, but she knew this was he. The ornate clothes were soiled and dusty but the silver conchas shone in the sunlight and the fringes on the buckskin vest trembled as though with exultation. Somebody shouted, "Good work, Ed!" and the rider raised his head and for an instant white teeth showed in a grin beneath the black mustache.

Then Bradford's horse came into view, reins tied to the cantle of Engle's saddle. Across its back was tied a limp form with arms and legs adangle and a hanging dark head which moved lifelessly with the action of the horse.

Pierson muttered an oath in his agony and put his hands on Nancy's shoulders as though to steady her; but she did not faint, she did not speak, she did not move.

Pierson leaned over her and spoke fiercely. "My gun's in the buckboard. I'm goin' to get it and kill that devil if it's the last thing I do!"

She spoke then. "No. No. I—I—some water, Uncle Randolph! I—"

He looked into her white face and turned quickly. They were alone in the lobby. He started at a run for the kitchen.

Nancy got up and hurried through the front doorway and to the buckboard. Snatching the big sixgun from its holster, she thrust it beneath her cape, gripping it tightly. At the far end of the street the two horses were turning into the trail which led up the slope to the cemetery. She hurried after them.

The men who followed stopped at the foot of the trail. The excitement was over and there remained only the dull process of lowering the unfortunate victim into the grave and covering him with an earthen blanket. Besides, it was a long climb and they were on foot. Only one person followed the horses up the grade and that was a palefaced girl who held something tightly clutched beneath her cape. She walked firmly but stiffly.

The horses stopped beside a mound of earth, and the man got down and set about unlashing the body draped across Texas Jack's horse. He got the lifeless form in his arms and rounded the pile of dirt. Nancy hurried. She could not see him now and assumed that he was on his knees lowering Texas Jack into the grave.

She reached the mound—rounded it. The man in the buckskin vest was on his knees with his back to her. She drew out the gun, pointed it. "Look around, Edward Engle!"

Startled, the head whipped about and she saw surprised, staring eyes. Right between those eyes, she thought. Coldly, as relentlessly as she would shoot a rattlesnake. Her finger tightened on the trigger.

"Nancy!" The voice was hoarse but there was a ring to it which thrilled her like the trump of doom. *"Nancy!"*

The arm lowered, the gun fell from lifeless fingers. The man was scrambling to his feet, his arms outstretched, and he caught her as she fell.

TWO hours later, a distraught Randolph Pierson was handed a note by the hotel clerk. The tightly glued envelope had been cut from wrapping paper, and the penciled address had been written by Nancy.

He read a few lines, gave an amazed exclamation; then read the rest excitedly.

"News of your nice, Randolph?" inquired the clerk.

Pierson controlled his emotion and answered as calmly as he could.

"Yes. She's safe. Ah—met some friends, suh, and is returning to Domingo with them."

He went outside and got into the buckboard and drove back towards Domingo; but as soon as he was out of the town, he drew rein and re-read the letter.

Dear Uncle Randolph:

I am writing this letter on a piece of wrapping paper and will stop the morning stage and send it to you. And if I scribble you must know that I'm so excited I just can't make my pencil behave. For, Uncle, it wasn't Ed Engle we saw on that first horse, it was John! Engle was the one on the second horse, the one that—even now the thought of that dangling figure turns me cold.

When you left the room, I got your gun from the buckboard intending to follow Engle to the cemetery and shoot him. Uncle, I was about to pull the trigger when he called my name and I knew he was John.

It's all very simple and he fooled both of us because we were expecting the worst. Before John went to meet Engle he bought some glue and a pair of scissors. He knew that even if John Bradford survived Texas Jack must die. Engle's shot gave him a nasty scalp wound and knocked him unconscious, but his bullet sped true, thank God! And when he awoke he found Engle dead on the ground.

He clipped Ed's mustache and sideburns, then put glue on his own lip and cheeks and stuck hair from his horse's mane in place. Then he trimmed them as best he could and changed clothing with Engle. He tied Ed on Texas Jack's horse and rode Engle's horse himself. Nobody knew either of them and the people of Briscoe saw—or thought they saw—a man named Ed Engle make good his brag to kill the notorious Texas Jack, and they'll spread the word to the far ends of the earth and never again will Texas Jack be forced to fight for his life.

Of course he had to get away at once. He wanted me to wait at Domingo until he sent for me, but I just couldn't do that. I'm going with him. Luckily I wore my riding outfit beneath my cape, and we have Engle's horse and rig.

We're riding off into the wide, beautiful world together, and the first town we reach we shall be married. Then to find a nice place to settle and live in the peace and happiness both of us are so anxious for.

Destroy this letter, dearest Uncle, and never mention a word of what has happened as you love me. And when we've found our Paradise, I'll write again and sign myself very, very proudly, Mrs. John Bradford!

John says the stage is in sight, so I must close. *Hasta la vista,* darling!

Your more-happy-than-she-deserves—
Nancy.

STRICTLY ORNAMENTAL

By Austin Corcoran

"THIS is going to be a momentous day," Danny Hamilton announced, setting down his coffee cup with a clatter. "The day I make the most important move of my life."

"How come?" Spike asked. "Going to sell out? Quit the cow business?"

"Nope. I'm going to fall in love," Danny declared solemnly.

Spike's lower jaw sagged, extending his long face to even greater length. Then he laughed derisively. "Just like that, eh? Why this particular day? And who's the young lady?"

"I don't like compound questions," Danny said, "answerin' 'em is likely to get you into trouble. We'll take the first part—the reply to which is, I just can't take your cooking any longer. And no cook is worth two whoops unless she's a woman. We can't expect a woman to come out here to cook for two cowpunchers, unless she's married to one of 'em."

He paused to consider Spike's leathery features, his long chin, long ears and nose, the tufty eyebrows that looked as if they had been pasted on, then the premature baldness which gave his forehead an extra two or three inches in height. "Doubt if a woman would wanta marry you—"

"They wouldn't get no chance!" Spike interpolated heatedly.

Danny continued his statement, "—and since a woman don't wanta marry a man that isn't in love with her, I've gotta fall in love."

"Humph!" Spike ejaculated even more derisively. "Always figgered a fellow was a fool to kid himself into the impossible."

"Impossible nothing!" Danny exclaimed tartly. "Falling in love is like anything else—a feller only needs to organize himself; use system, like he does in the cow business."

"Yep," Spike agreed ironically, "and brace hisself to come slap up against the unexpected.

When he thinks he's settin' pretty, finds he's got to start all over again. I'll say you'd better organize yourself to meet plenty trouble."

"We've got that right now," Danny retorted. "You don't seem to realize that a stomach is a delicate and sensitive organ, where a heap of man's troubles get their start. Didn't you read in the paper how Ed Devlin is in the hospital on account of a serious digestive condition? And he's a bachelor that's always lived on his own cooking, which is no worse than yours. I figure we're living on borrowed time, so far as our stomachs are concerned. And the proper way to meet calamity is to ward it off before it can happen. When it's a choice of having to cut out eating or of falling in love, I'll risk the love."

On the way into town he considered each girl among his numerous acquaintances. After some juggling in his mind, Beth Morgan and Sally Thompson headed the list. They

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The little cowtown of Willis had never seen anything so electrifying as Nanette Powell when she breezed in from the East. But the shock to the town was as nothing compared to the forceful jolt that hit young Danny Hamilton.

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were about equally good-looking and friendly and each was familiar with ranch life. Beth was of medium height and plump, with brown hair and eyes. Sally was a honeyhaired blonde with hazel eyes. Both had won prizes at the County Fair for cooking.

"I'll only have to look each one of 'em over once, with this idea in mind, and make my decision," he thought. "There really isn't anything to this marrying business if you go at it from the right angle."

ARRIVED in Willis, Danny went to the Reilly House and took a room. Probably would need to stay over at least one night.

"Well, Danny, I'm surprised to see you in town so early in the week," Mrs. Reilly remarked as he signed the register.

"Had important business to look after," he said with gravity.

The room matter settled, he took a chair near the side window of the lobby to concentrate on his next move. But his train of thought was almost instantly broken by a staccatto tapping of heels, and a girl appeared in the open doorway where she halted for a few seconds, her glance sweeping the room. She was slender, but the flaring skirt revealed legs that were not only intended to carry her around; they also had the right sort of curves. The same could be said of her figure, suggested rather than revealed by an organdy blouse. The snowy whiteness of this set off ebony black hair and skin that had roses and cream beat a mile.

She went on to the desk without appearing to notice Danny. He wrenched his thoughts back to the subject so vital to him. But it proved impossible to hold his gaze away from the two women who were holding a low-toned conversation. The manner in which Mrs. Reilly glanced at him indicated that Danny was the object of her speech.

He had never seen the girl. A fellow wouldn't forget her. And he guessed it was just as excusable to enjoy looking at her as at a magazine cover, or watching the star of a movie. She was strictly ornamental. Couldn't possibly serve any purpose save to entertain and please the eye.

When she turned and came towards him with a businesslike manner, Danny didn't waste the opportunity further to size up her appearance. Her eyes were not a true blue, had a bit too greenish a tinge—or were they grey? Intensely alive, they changed expression in a most confusing manner. Her hair was not exactly red, had too much gold. Her mouth was just the right size with a cute little dimple tucked at the corner of her pleasingly full lips.

"Mister Danny Hamilton—of the Triangle Ranch? she asked, as she came near.

"That's me," he replied, leaping to his feet with a fast growing smile.

"My name is Powell, Nanette Powell," she explained. "I'm with the *Star*. We are running a daily feature concerning some local highlight—a human interest idea, you know. I'd like to make the next one about you. Since you are not especially busy this morning, how about giving me a few facts? Only a short interview," she concluded encouragingly when Danny's smile went out like a light.

"I'm not important," he said, wriggling with embarrassment. "Shucks! Nobody would be interested in an article about me."

"I disagree," she stated in a firm tone, which hardly seemed to fit with her distinctly feminine appearance. Seating herself in a nearby chair, she took a notebook and pencil from her handbag. The combination of unusually nice contours, a soft voice with a kind of throbbing undertone and those tantalizing eyes, destroyed Danny's normal calm control.

"I can't possibly give the—the time to an interview," he stammered. "I am terribly busy this morning—came in on purpose—about a deal."

"How interesting," the soft voice cooed. "Some big cattle deal, I suppose?"

"Oh, no," Danny said hastily.

"Politics?" she suggested, her eyes fairly scintillating. Danny had a sensation similar to hypnosis as he looked into them. "Tell me," she coaxed. "Politics are so terribly important in this neighborhood just now. Are you thinking of running for office? Please—I won't tell a soul, until you give me permission."

"Heck, no!" he burst out. "It's only that I came to town to get—to get us a cook." He felt perspiration prickling at the roots of his thick, dark hair. Noting her puzzled expression, he explained, "You see a cook is terribly important. A cowboy's food is half his life, you might say. Success depends as much on his stomach as his brains. If his digestion goes haywire—well, Miss Powell, we've *gotta* have a cook."

DANNY had not meant to say that, but between confusion inspired by this amazing girl's nearness and the necessity to sidestep being interviewed for the local paper, he seized the only clear idea remaining in his mind. The troubled expression of his dark eyes entreated her to understand.

"I see," she said, thrusting the notebook back into her handbag. "You have to keep right on your toes, full of pep every minute, to run an outfit like the Hamilton Ranch. I understand it is one of the oldest in this country and that the Triangle brand stands for top quality. You are the third generation of Hamiltons, aren't you? And your family have made a good bit of the local range history."

"That's right," Danny admitted modestly, yet with natural pride. He was more at ease now that the notebook was out of sight and she had abandoned the idea of an interview. Talking with her was swell. She listened with absorbed attention while he tried to give her a picture of the Triangle outfit and a cowman's life as he saw it. "I wouldn't trade places with a king," he declared, "and the fact is, a cowboy has a darned-right freer life—nobody bosses him."

"It is wonderful," she agreed. "I never saw a place like your ranch, but you have made it seem very real."

"Why don't you come out sometime?" he suggested. "It isn't far—only about five miles from Willis. And visitors are sure welcome."

"I may take you up on that," she said with a smile that dazed Danny for a full minute. "I have certainly enjoyed this little visit, Danny Hamilton. Now I must get back on my job."

He went with her towards the doorway. "Sorry I delayed you," he said. "But you'll find somebody to interview. There's Harvey Ingersoll, now." Danny indicated a middle-aged man who was passing the hotel with a slow, important stride. "He likes having his name in the papers, and he's trying to get into the State Senate."

"Thanks," Nanette Powell replied, the dimple flickering as if she were highly amused about something.

With a quick nod of her brighthaired head and swirl of a flared skirt that set off her legs is a most satisfactory manner, she hurried into the street.

Danny turned to the desk. "She been in town long?" he asked.

"About a week, I guess," Mrs. Reilly replied, looking at him reflectively. "I heard she's related to the new managing editor of the *Star*. Came from the East."

"Probably from a city," Danny said. "One of those—what they call 'career girls', I suppose."

"She's smart, all right," Mrs. Reilly declared. "And Nanette's got a way with her that makes all the fellers take notice. That's kind of got the girls on the run, yet she's so nice to everybody, they can't pick a quarrel."

"Our girls don't need to worry none," Danny said with assurance. "They've got plenty on the ball that Nanette ain't got. Fellers will go hard for looking at her, but when it comes to anything beyond that—well, they'll think about the substantial qualities of the home product. And Willis girls stack up 100 per cent."

"Your opinion is very interesting," Mrs. Reilly told him. He thought there was a twinkle in her eye, then decided he was mistaken, for her tone was plenty solemn.

The arm chair by the window which had recently seemed a comfortable spot to assemble his plans now had a lonely, deserted look. But concentration upon the object of his trip to town proved as impossible out of doors. His thoughts jumped about like colors in a kaleidescope, none of them forming a pattern containing Beth Morgan or Sally Thompson for its center. It was chance that gave him a boost in the right direction, when a roundfaced, blackhaired girl came from a store Danny was passing.

"Hul-lo, Beth!" he exclaimed. "Glad I ran into you. I was thinking it would be fun to take a ride over to the river this afternoon."

"Sorry, I can't possibly," she replied with evident disappointment. "Mother has charge of making the icecream for the festival tonight, and I have to help her at the schoolhouse."

"Well—how about me helping too?" he asked.

"Fine," she agreed. "We can use a man with a strong arm. Come on home and have dinner with me. Then you can help us carry things over to the school."

MRS. Morgan was a notable cook and her daughter reputed to be almost as good. Perhaps this dinner, with the opportunity to study Beth in domestic surroundings, would settle Danny's problem, and he could dismiss Sally Thompson from consideration. His elation mounted when he took a seat at the well laden table. The juice had not all been cooked out of the steak, the fried potatoes were crisp, golden discs instead of charred hunks, damp with grease. And it was fine to know that Beth made the light biscuits and apple pie, which were especial weaknesses of Danny's.

When it came to packing stuff over to the schoolhouse he could see that Beth was a real organizer. She told Danny what to carry and exactly how this was to be done, showing plainly that there was but one right way to do anything and that Beth Morgan knew what that was.

"Beth is just like her mother," Granny Hawkins remarked, "capable as they come, and won't take on any ideas but her own."

Danny glanced at Mrs. Morgan, who was bossing several other women and quickly bringing order to the assembled workers. Beth really was very like her, with the same set of her mouth, kind of pulling in her lips. Built like her mother, too, except for some 40 pounds, less of weight. Now that he thought of it, she had kind of square outlines. But what the blazes! Danny checked critical thoughts. It was practical qualities a fellow wanted in a wife. What good was a pretty picture when you were hungry? Beth was good enough looking, or he had always thought so. It was funny her dark eyes seemed less bright today. Might be just as well to go slow; take a closer look at Sally Thompson. She was slender, and it didn't run in her family to get heavy. She had a soft voice—asked you to do things instead of telling you every move you should make.

Danny stuck by until the contents of the row of freezers was pronounced ready for the evening. Then he excused himself on the plea of business. This consisted of dropping into several stores while he kept a watchful eye on the sidewalk. "Nobody interesting," he decided, wondering how late Nanette worked in the newspaper office. "I'd just as soon talk to her awhile. It's too bad she didn't learn something beside career stuff," he sighed, "when she's so easy to look at—and got such cute ways."

He returned slowly to the hotel. He had heard the women saying that Sally Thompson was going to bring one of her famous four-layer chocolate cakes to the festival. He would make her get him a piece—maybe that would be a good way to lead up to his purpose. "Yep," he reflected as he turned in at the entrance of the Reilly House, "just like I told Spike; a feller only needs to organize himself. I've figgered this with cold facts, and if Sally stacks closer to what I want, I shall set right out falling in love with her."

WHEN he crossed the lobby he was dimly aware that several people were seated at one side. Mrs. Reilly hailed him as he headed for the stairs.

"Danny," she said, "these folks have been waiting for you."

"For me?" he asked, turning to glance questioningly at the line-up of faces, each staring intently at him. There was old Slum Winters, but the remainder were strangers, ranging from an aggressive blonde of indeterminate age to a ponderous creature holding a

scowling boy of some five years by the hand.

"It's about your ad," Slum spoke up, getting to his feet and approaching Danny with a snaggletoothed grin. "I got here first and being as I am experienced, I knowed I'd fill the bill for you."

"Ad?" Danny ejaculated.

"That piece in the paper this afternoon," Slum explained, "about you being so up against it for a cook you had to make this trip to town. I'm all set to pull right out with ye."

"Hold it!" Danny said, a trifle sharply. "It's a mistake."

"You told the *Star* reporter that was what brought you—" Slum began.

"Nothing doing," Danny cut him off, eyeing Slum's rumpled shirt and grimy hands with distaste. Made him mad to even think of Slum in the Triangle kitchen.

"Lissen—"

"I said, nothing doing!" To clinch the matter, Danny added, "I wouldn't even consider a man cook."

"You're right, Mister Hamilton," the fat woman agreed, as she heaved herself to her feet and came towards him. "It takes a woman to feed menfolks as they'd oughta be. I've had 15 years experience and there ain't my beat in this country. You get a bargain in me; whatever you are aimin' to pay, you can deduct a quarter of it for my Sammy's board."

"Wait a minute!" Danny commanded. "There has been a serious mistake. And I do *not* want—!"

"Of course you don't!" the blonde exclaimed. "You don't want a kid around the place, gettin' into everything. Now I'm alone—and I'm quick on my feet. And can I sling a skillet! Just wait till you stick a fork into my fried steak and taters."

Danny felt as if he were drowning. Eyes seemed to surround him, boring into him, eyes that held a threat if he did not accept the services of their owners. At all costs he must get rid of these people. Nothing could be more awful than one of them established in his kitchen. Get rid of them; then deal with the bird who put that ad in the *Star*. A licking was too good for him.

The candidates were on their feet now, closing in.

"Stop!" Danny ordered. "There is no job! I do *not* want a cook. Whatever you read in the *Star* is a mistake."

Whirling on his heel he stalked to the desk where he had glimpsed a copy of the *Evening Star*. Grabbing this he made for the stairs, leaped up them three steps at a time and dashed along the hall to his room. There one glance at the front page gave him a staggering shock. In the very center were startlingly black headlines.

AMERICAN ROYALTY
KINGS OF RANGELAND
Danny Hamilton So Names
Our American Cattlemen

His gaze raced over the paragraphs wherein he read his impulsive words of the morning, almost verbatim. The concluding lines were a statement that the *Star* had been fortunate in securing an interview at a time when Hamilton had been compelled to desert the pressing demands of ranch work to come into town in search of a cook. Such a member of the staff was of utmost importance, since no ranch outfit could properly function without the best of food.

"Damn!"

The word exploded from Danny's lips. He was startled and angry and absolutely flabbergasted. The nerve of that girl—to take the words from his mouth, words uttered in friendly talk, and spread them over that newspaper. He glared at the printed letters until they jigged about on the page, gradually settling to coherent sentences. Finally a sheepish grin broke the hard surface of his features.

"But she is a helluva clever kid," he thought. "Imagine remembering all that, exactly as I said it. Maybe it ain't so bad. At least it's no worse than those speeches Ingersoll gives on the Fourth of July. Only I don't do my talkin' for the public, and this makes me feel like a fool. And I'm going to hop on her hard about that cook business!"

After having his intentions broadcast he would have to go easy on what he said to Sally about her cooking. Danny's ears burned hotly. That was his basic reason for falling in love—so the girl would not think he merely was interested in securing a cook.

He would certainly hunt up Nanette Powell and make her understand she mustn't put everything she heard into print. It was a shame for folks to get mad at such a nice girl. But she was visible no place along Main Street, and Danny couldn't risk making inquiries regarding her residence, even if he had dared call there. Nanette was like dynamite—

safe enough to have around if you understood the peril and took no chances. This was to be the crucial evening, the definite start of his campaign, after he came to a decision between Beth Morgan and Sally Thompson. The next trip to town could bring his declaration; that wasn't too soon, when there was such serious reason to hurry the wedding.

HE STROLLED over to the schoolhouse lawn as early as it seemed advisable to make appearance. Luck was with him, for he spied Sally at once, tall and slender, a ruffled white apron tied about her slim waist.

"How about getting me some ice cream?" he asked, "And a couple of pieces of your chocolate cake. I won't accept any other kind."

"Of course, Danny, if you want it," she assented, flushing brightly.

"And can't you eat a dish of cream with me?"

"If you like," she said. "We're not very busy yet."

He remembered that she was always like that, ready to do what you suggested. Sally would never boss anybody—nor have any set ideas of her own.

The cake reached his highest expectations, four layers of a rich golden color with luscious chocolate filling, and topped with thick, smooth frosting decorated with candied cherries. Danny ate with gusto while Sally agreed with every statement he made, looking at him with soft, admiring eyes. He thought she resembled a picture he had seen on the wall of an old house, a picture entitled, "A Sweet and Gentle Maiden."

When he was attacking the second piece of cake, he became aware of a stir among nearby groups, a slowing of chatter, then low exclamations that aroused his curiosity.

"There—look there!"

"Quick! Get an eyeful of the Heart Throb!"

"Say, that's really something!"

Danny glanced towards the sidewalk, his gaze gluing itself to the girl stepping lightly to the lawn. His reactions of the morning were mild in comparison with these responding to a second sight of Nanette Powell. She was wearing the most fascinating dress that he had ever seen. Against the white background of the material there was a pattern of fully opened roses of American Beauty red, with green leaves and stems. The stripes of the pattern extended around the full, short skirt. A rather closely fitted waist had a high neck which tied at the throat with a soft bow. Sleeves covered her arms to the wrists. And Danny saw that the dress had an equally marvelous look no matter which way its wearer faced.

"O-o-oh, my!" Sally breathed.

"Swell outfit, isn't it?" Danny said.

"I guess so," she granted, somewhat reluctantly. "But it's rather—rather startling."

"I like them flowers," he declared.

"Mother always says plain clothes that don't attract attention are best," Sally sighed wistfully, glancing down at the pale yellow dress that nearly matched her hair. "Do you think I'd look better in a flowered dress—like that?"

"Not a bit," Danny declared honestly. "You wouldn't look like yourself."

She smiled at him. "You say such nice things, Danny," she told him. "Besides, it isn't the way a girl dresses that really counts, it's what she can do."

"That's right, Sally," he agreed. But he was thinking that it did a fellow's eyes good to feast on something that was not entirely practical.

Nanette Powell had vanished in the center of a lively group, and Danny's gaze returned to Sally. Her smile was as ready and sweet as ever. But—damnit, he was getting too critical!—all girls couldn't be cut from the same pattern. What if Sally was a little on the thin side? She was healthy and goodnatured. She was all right. But it was kind of a relief to know he didn't have to commit himself until the next trip to town.

Half an hour later he was drifting through the crowd when Nanette's voice brought him up short.

"Hello, Danny Hamilton, how did you like the interview?" she asked.

"You're a brave girl to ask me that," he replied, turning to eye her solemnly. "After I talk to your boss, you're likely to get fired."

"Then you're mad at me!" she exclaimed, crinkling her eyes in a manner very upsetting to Danny's resolution to be stern.

He held the lips that wanted to smile, in a firm line. "I sure am," he asserted, trying to scowl.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I like you, Danny Hamilton, and I hoped you would like me—a little."

"I do!" he exclaimed, suddenly reckless of consequences, as he yielded to a strange elation.

"That's all right, then," Nanette smiled. "Now I must run back to Larry Williams. He's treating me to ice cream and cake."

Larry Williams, huh? Danny's recently soaring feelings came down with a thump. The youngest son of the Willis Bank President was a spoiled kid. But—well, perhaps he was all right for a career girl. And certainly Danny was not going to make it his business who Nanette played around with.

From that instant the festival was a dull affair. Danny decided it was a good idea to ride along home and be there to start the morning work early; nothing to be gained by loitering around.

SPIKE was asleep and snoring when Danny stole softly into the ranchhouse. But his long face resembled a question mark when he appeared in the kitchen at breakfast time.

"Well, where's the cook?" Spike's tone was full of skepticism and I-told-you-so's.

"She'll be along one of these days, you'll see," Danny replied, grinning. He well knew Spike's pessimism where women were concerned. "Everything is working out just as I planned."

"You mean to tell me you fell in love, just like that? Got it all fixed up?" Spike persisted.

"Sure. Started right in as soon as I saw her today," Danny said, determined to halt Spike's questioning. "But you don't get married quite that quick. There's a—a few preliminaries. She may even come out and size up the place; figure on the new stuff she'll need in the kitchen. Being a swell cook, she's particular."

It was fortunate Spike could not peer into the chaos which was Danny's mind that morning. Beth—Sally, which? He was now no nearer a decision than he had been when he rode into town the previous day. Worse, he was a lot more critical, thinking of points he hadn't dreamed of then. Marrying a cook was serious business; that is, one you had to fall in love with.

Four days later he rode into Willis, spurred to quick action by the awfulness of Spike's hot cakes that morning. He must immediately decide between the two girls and concentrate upon her good points. And there was comfort in remembering that some wise old guy had once said, "The best and most enduring love comes after marriage, not before."

Arrived at the edge of town Danny, stricken by panic, decided he would leave his choice to chance. He would toss up a coin. If heads came up, Sally would be the one, if the reverse, Beth.

When he had tied his horse to the hitchrail alongside the Emporium, Danny stepped up on the walk that led around to the store front. Taking a quarter from his pocket, he tossed it about in his lightly closed palm, then dropped it on the planks. Pop Winters had strolled around the corner and was watching almost as tensely as Danny while the coin stuck on edge and did a slanting roll. It seemed to catch Danny's mood, veering this way then that, almost stopping, then twirling on.

"The walk's awful crooked," Pop remarked, "Keeps you guessin'. Hey! Watch that crack!"

His warning came too late. The quarter faltered in crossing a slit between planks, then dropped from sight.

"I'll have to yank up a board!" Danny exclaimed disgustedly.

"Won't do ye no good," Pop said, "'less you get a ladder. There's a hole ten foot deep under this piece of walk."

"Guess that's a sign I've got to make up my own mind," he sighed. Even Fate would give him no hint. Okay! Sally's home was the nearest; he'd make for there as fast as his legs could move, and cast the die. It was something of a let-down to discover that Sally was spending the week on her brother's ranch. When he discovered that Beth, too, was away for the day, Danny had a sensation of dizzy relief. And he could stand off Spike's questions this time with the truthful statement that the girl was out of town.

His spirits soared. Nanette Powell was approaching, and this time he didn't have to sidestep temptation; he could yield to thorough enjoyment of this reprieve. She could spare only an hour, but they had dinner together at the hotel, and Danny had never experienced such carefree gaiety.

When they parted at the steps of the *Evening Star* office, she gave him a puzzled look. "Why, you said goodby as if it was forever!" she exclaimed.

"Did I?" Danny tried hard to smile. "Well, it isn't. I'll be seeing you—around town."

"Make it soon," she laughed, waving a hand as he strode away.

He rode home rather glumly. "That was a smart quarter," he thought. "Seemed like it knew I didn't hafta make up my mind today.

But the next time I try that stunt, I'll see there aren't any cracks handy—and it will be the finish."

SEVERAL days passed. Then Spike grumbled sourly as he fried the steak one morning. "I knowed that was all talk. You ain't one inch nearer fallin' in love than you was two weeks ago."

"Is that so?" Danny said, trying to stifle that quivery feeling that kept hitting him inside. "You're going to get a big surprise one of these days. I don't think of anything else but her."

"Ye-ah?" Spike drawled sneeringly, not at all convinced by Danny's weak defense.

But Danny's words had come close to the truth, though it was three "hers" instead of one that now haunted his thoughts. When he forced himself to consider Beth and Sally, Nanette Powell constantly intruded. It daily proved more difficult to cling to his common sense and oust her.

One morning Spike was especially aggravating, and Danny decided he had been damned foolish to get himself into such a situation. Saddling up, he rode away from the ranch, leaving Spike to mend a sagging corral gate. A couple of hours later he turned back. He would go to town this very morning and put an end to the unendurable suspense and to Spike's eternal rubbing it in. Danny could no longer keep his mind on his work. The situation was desperate.

When he came in sight of the house, he saw a horse he recognized as belonging to the town livery, tied to the corral fence. Wondering who had ridden out to the ranch, he swung in close to the dwelling, from which he could hear Spike's twangy voice. The lanky cowboy had left off repairs on the corral gate, and it was evident he was making the most of his chance to entertain company.

"You're as welcome as spring after a hard winter," he was assuring somebody earnestly. "I really didn't believe Danny when he said you'd be along. But then, shucks! I didn't believe anything he told me—'bout falling in love. None of it!"

"Who in hell is in there?" Danny exclaimed flinging himself from the saddle and leaping for the open doorway.

"It's too bad he didn't know you was coming out today," Spike continued. "But I can show you around the place just as well as him. And you can make out the list of whatever new stuff you want in the kitchen. I'll say Danny is a real picker! Now that I've seen you, I can easy understand how it wasn't no effort for him to fall in—"

"Spike!" The word exploded, cutting off further speech on the cowboy's part.

Nanette Powell stood in the center of the living room, gazing about her with interest. Her glance went to Danny, the dimple flickering and her eyes twinkling as she said, "You asked me to ride out some day."

"Sure," he assented nervously, on edge to discover how much Spike had given away. "Mighty glad you came. Spike, you can run along and finish that gate now."

As the cowboy slowly departed, grinning over his shoulder, Danny floundered for words. He had never imagined a girl's mere presence could so glorify a house.

"What makes you look so serious?" she asked, a trifle breathlessly. "If I'm in the way, I'll run along back to town."

"It isn't that," Danny said. "I—I was wishing you would never go away."

"Danny!" she exclaimed, her eyes twinkling again. "Am I to believe what Spike was saying, that you told him you fell in love the first day you saw me?" She paused, blushing.

"That's right," Danny assented, "I sure did."

"And—when were you going to tell me?"

"I am telling you, right now!" Danny exclaimed. He did so, very convincingly, concluding, "Time doesn't mean anything. A week is plenty long enough to be sure you wanta marry a girl—five minutes, when she's the right one, like you!" He had her in a tight clasp, their cheeks together, as he added, punctuating each word with a kiss, "How soon are you going to quit that newspaper?"

Nanette laughed softly. "I quit that more than five minutes ago, Danny darlin'."

"Then everything's just grand!" he exclaimed. "Now that you're going to be here, it won't be any trouble a-tall to get a woman cook."

"What?" Nanette stared at him in consternation. "Danny Hamilton—no woman but me is going to cook in our kitchen. Why, that's the only thing I really know how to do."

"O-o-oh!" Danny sighed ecstatically. "Did you ever hear the like of that!" He pulled her tight into his arms again, whispering, "Honey, you're the most wonderful, smartest girl in the entire world."

FIDDLE AND BEAU

By Cliff Walters

THE music in the dancehall at Torchlight was sweet and rhythmic. The floor was smooth. The crowd was jovial. Everyone was having a good time—except Claire Loring, the slender, darkhaired girl whose deep brown eyes were half closed as she played her violin. Claire was tired. The monotonous sound of moving feet wearied her. Wearied her as it had in Sandville the night before; in Bend City the night before that—and in Redrock last Wednesday night.

Her older sister Rita, who was playing the piano, leaned over and said, "Don't go to sleep on this waltz, Claire. One more number, and we get an hour's rest while the dancers go to midnight supper."

"Thank heaven," said Claire, smoothly manipulating her bow while producing, with her flexible, shapely left hand, a soft vibrato that brought joy to the ears of cowpunchers and ranch girls accustomed to hearing fiddles that squeaked and howled. "That'll give us time to drag your celebrating husband away from some bar or poker table and get him back to his drums. After all, why shouldn't he work a little? He's the one that collects the $25 we're making tonight!"

Rita was irked by that truthful remark. She began pounding the piano keys a bit harder, stepping up the rhythm a little. Pretty soon, however, she leaned over again and said, "Well, now you can wake up! Your golden-haired Romeo is here. Good heavens! He follows our buckboard like the Wyoming dust!"

Immediately Claire's brown eyes were wide open. She turned on her chair a little and saw, as she had seen in Sandville and Bend City and Redrock, a tall, bright-haired young man entering the dance hall. Leisurely, smiling, he ambled toward the low platform and sat down on the edge of it. With serene blue eyes he glanced at the violinist and nodded shyly.

If Claire's nerves hadn't been on edge, if

Music and big money—and attempted murder—are assuredly strange traveling companions. Claire Loring, good trouper and true daughter of the West, had to deal with all three.

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she hadn't been goaded by Rita's "golden-haired Romeo" remark, she might not have stood up as she did now and boldly announced: "The next chorus of the Cowboy's Waltz will be sung by the newest member of our troupe—Buck Bronson!"

If the tall, husky-shouldered man was surprised by that announcement, he didn't bolt out the side door of the hall, as Claire rather suspected he might. He began to sing, and in a soft, melodic baritone voice:

I'm a buckaroo wild,
And reckless when riled;
Yeah, I've got my faults,
But there's music tonight.
I don't want to fight;
I just want to waltz!

Astonished by the mellowness of that voice, Claire wasn't at all surprised when, at the conclusion of that chorus, the merry-making patrons of the dancehall vociferously applauded for—nay, demanded—an encore. And then another one.

Smiling a little wryly, Rita said to her sister, "Another encore, lovely fiddler. And remember, you started this singing business. He actually can sing, too!"

"That he can—darn him!" murmured Claire, again tucking the violin under her shapely chin.

THE music had stopped, and it was time for the dancers to go down to the Widow William's boarding house for midnight supper, when a husky, darkhaired cowpuncher, who had been dividing his time between the dancehall and the saloon across the street, came up to the platform and said to Claire, "Come on, pretty fiddler. We're goin' to supper together, you and me."

"I'm afraid you have me confused with some other girl," she answered.

"Oh, no. Come on now, Miss Loring. My name's Earl Cayhorn. And your brother-in-law and manager—he's over at the saloon—said it'd be all right with him if I took you to—"

"He must be as drunk as you are," Claire interrupted, eliciting a sharp look of disapproval from her sister.

"So you're too good to eat at the same table with common folks!" growled the beauty-stricken puncher.

"Not at all," Buck Bronson put in gently. "She's goin' to eat supper with me. So's her sister."

"You!" scoffed Cayhorn. "The buckaroo wild—that's reckless when riled. Yeah! Just how reckless!" Cayhorn gave the blond man a shove.

Buck made a fierce face—and shot a blow at least a foot over the drunk's head. But Cayhorn couldn't see where it was going. He ducked, fell down. He got up, looked around wildly and threw a mighty right swing at Buck who, smiling, moved back in plenty of time. The momentum of Cayhorn's swing threw him again. People whooped with joy at Buck Bronson's amusing antics—and the way the drunken cowpuncher kept flooring himself.

"Disgusting!" said Rita. But she smiled, and so did Claire.

Claire said, "I really am hungry. That evening meal at the hotel—ugh!"

"Come on, ladies," said Buck graciously. "Let's go to supper—before Mr. Cayhorn wears this floor out."

"All right, let's do," said Claire.

"I'll wait for Jim," said Rita Marsh, a bit nervously.

"He might not be back before daylight," said Claire firmly. "Come on, sis. If Stranger Bronson thinks enough of our music to follow us from town to town, let him pay the fiddler—with grub." Claire was feeling somewhat reckless herself. And very much disgusted with her brother-in-law, Jim Marsh. A husky, handsome, grey-eyed man who was content to trail from one cowtown to another, furnishing music for dances; but not furnishing much of it himself.

This wasn't the first time Claire Loring had been disgusted with the man her sister had married a year ago. That was shortly after the death of Mrs. Loring, a widow in the neighboring state of Montana; a frail, kindly woman who had been obliged to come West

for her health when Claire was only seven, and Rita nine. It had been a hard struggle for a piano teacher in Cedar Dome, Montana.

Well, this long trip down into Wyoming hadn't been Claire's idea. It had been promoted by Jim Marsh, and by Rita who had said, "We're flat broke, Claire. If we can realize something on the music Mother's taught us, make money and save it—"

But, because of Jim Marsh's addiction to poker, his penchant for hanging around the saloons, no money had been saved. Nor had Claire received the five dollars per night for her work that she was supposed to have received. Now, tired by loss of sleep, tired of trailing from one cowtown to another—and still broke—she didn't know what to do.

"I've got to do something," she kept telling herself. "But what?"

STILL struggling with that unanswered question, and after a very satisfying meal at the Widow Williams' boarding house, Claire excused herself from her sister and Buck Bronson; and walked alone, under the stars, along the grassy bank of Torch Creek. She hadn't gone far, however, when she heard the deep, stern voice of Jim Marsh calling:

"You've got a lot of gall, Buck Bronson—you damned coyote—taking my wife to midnight supper!"

Gasping, suddenly realizing what she had done, Claire ran back toward the Widow Williams' place. And saw, with horried eyes, big Jim Marsh throwing himself, tooth and nail, upon Buck Bronson, who had started to escort Rita back to the dancehall.

There was no clowning, no sham battle this time, so far as Buck Bronson was concerned. His adversary, stimulated by only a few drinks, was quick and strong and very angry. The tall, blond-haired man had to fight like a tiger to stand his ground. But, cool and savage, he held his own. And more. He warded off Jim Marsh's flailing fists, then sank a punishing blow to the midriff; followed that with a smashing right cross to the jaw which staggered Claire's brother-in-law close to the creek which ran past the Williams' home. Another right to the jaw sent Jim Marsh toppling into the stream.

"He'll drown!" Rita screamed.

"It'll bring him back to his senses, if any!" Buck said.

Dripping, shivering, Marsh struggled out of the shallow water just as the town marshal, a gangling man named Herb Creel, came clumping toward the scene and wanted to know what was going on.

Immediately Jim Marsh turned actor. He was the outraged husband trying to protect his wife from the uncouth attentions of a range bum that had been following her around from town to town. Bronson should be placed behind jail bars, kept there until Mrs. Marsh had traveled far beyond reach of his unwelcome attentions.

Claire protested that she had dined as Buck Bronson's guest tonight; that her sister had been invited to come along only because of Buck's generosity.

"How can a danged range bum afford to be so generous?" growled the marshal who, tonight, had had a couple of free drinks on Jim Marsh.

"I've got a little money," Buck put in, more disgusted than angry now.

"Yeah, about how much?" Creel said testily.

"I'm packin' a little over $100 with me."

"Now isn't that a coincidence, Creel?" said Jim Marsh. "It isn't over an hour ago that a drunken sheepherder came in the saloon and told you he'd been roobed—while he was asleep in the gutter—of over $50. Over $100, eh, Mr. Bronson? Well, there have been other drunks lying around the towns you've been through lately, too—while tagging my wife around."

"Jim!" cried Claire sharply. "You've no right, even if you have been whipped in a fight, to accuse Buck!"

"Come on, Bronson," said Creel. "The jail's over on the other side of town. Start walkin'. And don't try no tricks."

Helpless, furious, Claire watched the blond-haired man marched away. And while the crowd straggled back toward the dancehall. Rita said nervously, "You go to the hotel and change your clothes, Jim. Claire and I will go back to the dance."

"I'm ashamed to walk with you, Rita!" said the younger girl, dark eyes flashing. "Why didn't you speak up, tell the truth? You know, as well as your no-good husband does, that Buck Bronson isn't following *you* around from town to town!"

"Go back to the dance, you two," Marsh said bluntly.

"I'll do some more playing after you do some paying," retorted Claire. "You owe me eighty dollars."

"All right, dear little sister-in-law. Here's your money. I happened to win at poker to-

night." Marsh took a soggy roll of currency from his pocket and peeled off eight ten-dollar bills.

"There," said Rita triumphantly. "I hope you're satisfied now, Claire."

"I'm surprised, but not entirely satisfied," said Claire. "I won't be until Buck Bronson's released from jail. Well, the customers have paid for their dancing. Let's try to give them their money's worth. We're billed for three towns ahead, Mr. Marsh—Big Swale, Pointville and Lodge Rock. After that, it will just be Rita's piano playing and your tomtoms."

"I wouldn't get too independent, not on $80," Marsh replied. "But, if I were you, I'd sure forget that yellow-haired range bum that's been tagging you around."

"I thought he was tagging Rita," she retorted.

"Take Claire up to the dance, Rita," Marsh said.

DAWN was breaking when Claire put her violin in its case and walked alone over to the log hotel. She felt tired enough to throw herself on the bed and sleep forever. But she didn't sleep. She stood by the dust-streaked window in her little room and looked off toward a small building at the edge of town. A building that had only one small window which was barred.

"He never stole money from a drunken sheepherder," she told herself. "Maybe he's a range bum. But he's a man that wouldn't steal. And he's got a singing voice that I could listen to . . . forever."

Rita came to the door, told Claire she had better get to bed; that they would have to leave by noon to get to Big Swale. Rita sat down on the edge of the bed, cried a little and asked Claire to try to forgive Jim for losing his temper last night. He was sorry about it now; and he was growing tired of traipsing around from town to town. When late summer came, the three of them would return to Montana. Jim, who used to work in a bank, would go back to that work. There would be no more roaming around. The Marshes would have a permanent home, one in which Claire would always be welcome.

Sorry for her sister, but not forgiving Jim Marsh, Claire said, "I've known all along that Jim was a weakling. But I thought he was a better sport than to have an innocent man jailed."

"Innocent!" Rita said. "How do you know that Buck Bronson doesn't steal money from drunken sheepherders?"

"How do you know he does? How does Jim know?" Claire retorted.

"Buck Bronson doesn't work. He just travels around."

"Which goes for Jim, too," said Claire.

"All right," Rita flared. "If you hate Jim so much, go on back home. Now!" Tears sprang to her brown eyes.

"Whatever I think of Jim, I happen to love my talented sister," Claire said slowly. "I don't want to meddle, dear, but I have the feeling that you're skating on thin ice. If that ice should break, I want to be near you."

"Presuming to appoint yourself my guardian!" Rita cried. "Acting as if your were my mother instead of—" Then, abruptly, all show of anger, of bravado, left Rita. Her voice quivered as she said, "Oh, Claire, dear! I am skating on thin ice. And I know it, too. But I'm married to Jim. If I can steady him, get him to settle down and find a bank job—" She threw her arms about Claire and wept.

Later, Claire left the hotel and wandered out into the little town that was still asleep after its celebration. She wandered toward the jail and eventually up to a barred window which framed a lean, tanned face.

"Good morning, maker of sweet music," said Buck Bronson, smiling. "I knew, if I prayed long enough, you'd show up."

"I wish I could help you," she said.

"You can," he answered, thrusting a note through the window, "if you'll take this down to the telegraph office when the depot opens, and send it collect."

"I'll pay for the wire," she said quickly.

"That ain't necessary," he said. "Can you read it? Let's see."

Aloud she read, "John Hargrave, Stockgrower's Bank, Sageland, Wyoming. Dear Uncle John, your nephew's gone and got himself in jail, in Torchlight where the law ain't square, so send me, quick, some bail. I'm out of luck, but here I'm stuck.. Please get me out—and pronto . . . Buck."

Claire smiled, shook her head and remarked, "If you send all that to a banker—collect—he'll let you stay in jail."

"Not Uncle John. He really loves fine poetry. Will you send it?"

"At your risk," she answered, laughing. "I'd never have guessed you had an uncle who was a banker."

"And I wouldn't want another soul to guess

it, Claire Loring," he replied. "You won't tell anybody?"

"Not anybody."

"Thanks. I'll see you in Big Swale tonight, if not before."

"I only hope you're able to keep that promise," she said.

IT WAS late afternoon when the buckboard driven by a tired and silent Jim Marsh rolled its dusty way across a long tableland to the north of Big Swale, a town 20 miles south of Torchlight. Half asleep, Claire looked down at a little wooden box near her feet, a box which contained a pearl-handled six-shooter, encased in the fancy holster of a gun belt. Jim must have been lucky at poker last night, winning this fancy gun and enough money to pay his violinist in full.

Claire was suddenly and fully roused by the sight of a rider, mounted on a tall, fleet sorrel horse, loping down through the cedars which dotted the slope above the road.

"He's out of jail, Rita!" she said exultantly. "But, no! That isn't Buck Bronson. It's his sorrel horse, though. Look!"

The rider, a dark man with slate-grey eyes, hailed the passing buckboard and yelled, "Wait a minute!"

"Yeah. What'll you have?" Jim Marsh said impatiently.

The rider, who had quickly swung from the saddle and slipped a carbine from its scabbard, growled, "I'll have back that fancy sixgun you cheated me out of last night over the poker table, mister!"

"Give it to him, Jim," Rita urged nervously.

"All right. Take it," Marsh growled.

"You're a fine one to be calling anybody a cheat!" Claire snapped at the stranger. "You're riding a stolen horse! A horse that belongs to Buck Bronson. Yes, and when I get to Big Swale, I'm going to tell the law."

"You're goin' to keep your mouth shut—if you don't want to get your head shot off!" came his harsh reply. "That goes for all three of you, savvy? If any one of you sics the law on me, I'll collect three scalps. Now, drive on!"

Jim Marsh quickly obeyed that order. But he hadn't gone far when he said, "You keep your mouth shut about where and when you saw that badman, Claire. Or we'll all get in trouble."

"If you played cards with him, maybe you know who he is," she answered. "He reminds me of someone."

"I know they call him 'Boggs'."

"They can call him 'Done For', if Buck Bronson ever gets his hands on him," Claire said. "Look at him spur that sorrel horse!"

THE buckboard rolled on into Big Swale, up to another log hotel, much like the one in Torchlight. Claire ate supper alone that night, then, carrying her violin, went to the dancehall. There was no midnight supper, and not much of an attendance in the hall. Claire was grateful when the dance broke up at about one o'clock in the morning. She would get a good rest tonight—or that's what she thought.

When she walked back, alone, across the starlit street to the hotel, a soft voice from the shadows of the porch said, "Howdy, little maker of melody." A tall, indistinct figure moved forward.

"Buck!" she said in a low voice. "You did get out of jail!"

"Yes, thanks to you for sendin' that wire," he said. "But now I'm huntin' a horse thief, and I'd rather nobody knew I was around."

"I want to talk to you about that horse of years," she said. "Let's go somewhere."

"How about down by Swale Crick?" he said. "Here. Let me pack that fiddle of yours."

They moved down the street, passed the dancehall where Rita and Jim Marsh were settling up with the management. A late moon came up and silvered the riffles of the stream. Claire and Buck found a log and sat down. Upstream from them was a patch of wild roses that perfumed the lazy breeze.

"What a heavenly spot!" Claire said.

"That's why I picked it out," her companion answered, smiling. "I've spent most of the evening sittin' down here, alone. With you here, it does seem heavenly."

"About your stolen horse—" Claire began, abruptly changing the subject. Then she told him about the man called Boggs who had stolen a gun from her brother-in-law this afternoon.

"I've heard of him," Buck said, "but I didn't see him around Torchlight. I don't think he'd dare show up in town."

"He must have," she countered. "He was playing poker there with Jim Marsh. I noticed a young deputy sheriff at the dance tonight. You'd better get in touch with him, ride back to the benchland north of here early in the

morning and see if you can't pick up that bad-man's trail."

"Didn't your brother-in-law report the stolen gun business to the deputy?"

"No," she answered quickly. "And Jim wouldn't let me say a word to the law about your horse. You see, Boggs threatened to kill all three of us—Rita and Jim and me—if we reported it."

"I see. Well, I certainly wouldn't want you in danger. Or your sister."

She smiled a little. "It wouldn't matter so much about Jim Marsh?"

"I'm afraid he crawls about as low as a person can."

"Don't say that," she answered, "even if he gave you reason for it. After all, he is my sister's husband. And he'd had a few drinks last night. Jim's really a banker, like your Uncle John, you know."

"Not quite like Uncle John," he said. "John Hargrave's honest. He never tried to make slaves of his wife and sister-in-law, never hung around a saloon playin' poker and drinkin' while his family made the livin'. He ain't a tightfisted banker, either. He staked me to a nice little cow outfit down in the foothills of the Tepee Mountains."

"What became of it?"

"I've still got it."

"Yes?" she said, just a bit dubiously. "Then why are you gypsying around this country?"

"Well, sir," he answered, smiling, "a couple weeks ago I got to thinkin' that I was bein' selfish, keepin' all to myself that little parcel of Paradise—the beautiful little stream tumblin' past my cabin; the green meadowland; and the view of the mountains, right at my back door, raisin' tall and steep and pretty as a picture. I figured I ought to be sharin' it with somebody. So I saddled up my sorrel and went lookin'. Then, one night, I walked into Bendville dancehall and I saw you playin' your violin. And I says to myself, 'There she is.'"

"Very interesting," said Claire, "and, of course, I believe every word of it. Tell me, dear, how soon can we be married?"

Ignoring the mockery of her tone, he replied, "Oh, maybe within a week."

She rose and said, "Well, if you'll excuse me now, I'll go and start getting my trousseau ready."

"You're jokin', but I'm not," he said. "I did see you in the Bendville dancehall, and I did fall in love with you."

WHEN Claire reached the hotel, she found Rita alone in her room. Jim had gone over to the saloon, Rita said—and there was bitterness in her voice, too.

Claire went to bed, but not to sleep. She kept thinking of a cabin on the bank of a tumbling, silver stream; green meadowland; and mountains rising tall and steep.

Finally dozing off to sleep, Claire was awakened at dawn by Rita who, entering the room, said, "Jim isn't at the saloon. I went over to see. One of the horses, the one that's broke to ride, isn't in the livery barn, either."

Claire didn't finish. Through the open window came the sound of distant gunfire hammering at the dawn silence. And Rita Marsh, standing by that window, was suddenly as tense as a statue.

"Jim!" she said.

"Don't be foolish. It's just some drunken cowpunchers celebrating on their way home from town," Claire said, but she was more frightened than she sounded.

There followed long, dragging minutes. Claire and Rita got dressed, left the hotel and started over to the livery barn to see if Jim Marsh had returned.

"Maybe he didn't leave town," Claire told her sister. "Maybe that badman, Boggs, stole your fine black horse—like he stole Buck's sorrel over at Torchlight."

"Look!" Rita pointed toward the benchland. Four horses were trailing down that slope, single file. The first, a big sorrel, was ridden by Buck Bronson. Behind Buck came Cal Price, the resident deputy sheriff at Big Swale. The last two horses carried men who did not sit up in their saddles.

"It—it's Jim!" said Rita. She swayed, and Claire had to keep her from falling.

When Buck Bronson rode up, Claire said harshly, "You killed Jim Marsh! Evened a score—"

"That's right," answered the brittle-voiced man with the bright blond hair.

"Killed him because he had you thrown in jail for a few hours!" Rita cried.

"Not that," cut in Cal Price. "I'll tell you what happened."

THE deputy went back to the time that Jim Marsh had worked as cashier of a bank in a little town called Sageland two years ago. An outlaw called Boggs had held that bank up one day, had seriously wounded the bank owner, a man named John Hargrave, and

had ridden away with twelve thousand cash. He had hidden the money before he was caught and sent to the pen. Two weeks ago he had escaped from a convict road camp—and Jim Marsh, ex-cashier of the Sageland Bank, had traveled southward.

"Here's the money—cashed within two miles of Big Swale," said the deputy, holding up an old leather bag. "Jim Marsh and his brother, Bill Boggs, were splitting up their loot when Buck and me rode up on 'em."

"Brother?" Claire echoed. She was dazed.

"Yeah," Price said. "Marshes are sometimes called Boggs, ain't they? And it was those two brothers, one a banker, the other an outlaw, that fleeced the Sageland bank, and came within an ace of murderin' old John Hargrave, Buck Bronson's uncle. That's why Buck's been trailin' Marsh from town to town. He expected there'd be a meetin' between Marsh and his brother. Things got hot in Torchlight last night. Jim Marsh stole some money off three drunken sheepherders, and one drunk cowpunchers, then bought a gun."

Claire looked at Buck and said, "You knew who'd stolen that money from a drunk sheepherder? The crime you were jailed for?"

"Sure," he answered, "but I didn't want Marsh jailed. I wanted him to lead me to that money cache, my uncle's money."

"You wanted to murder Jim Marsh!" Rita cried hysterically.

"Hold on, Mrs. Marsh," Cal Price interrupted. "Marsh and his outlaw brother started shootin' first. Take your sister back to the hotel, Miss Loring."

Later that day Claire walked down to the bank of Swale Creek, and over to the log where Buck Bronson sat alone at the edge of a wild rose patch. Claire said, "I've been thinking it over, Buck. And maybe it's just as well there was a gun battle this morning."

"If there hadn't been," he said, "your sister would still be chained to Jim Marsh. She might have clung to him in his trouble. She might have divorced him. But, either way, she'd be tortured by the thought of him caged behind bars. I never killed a man before. I hated to kill Marsh; but I knew, even while our guns were barkin', that I'd be doin' your sister a big favor if—well, if he forced me to it."

"But what if Marsh or his outlaw brother had killed you?"

"Well, nobody but Uncle John would've cared much, I guess."

"Don't say that, Buck." Hazel eyes were moist. "Do you know that I was hurt this morning when I found out that you'd been trailing a crook, instead of me? And do you know that—sometime I'd like to see the Tepee Mountains, rising steep and tall and like a picture?"

He got up, looked at her, studied her, with clear blue eyes. "You would?"

"Yes, Buck."

"But would Rita stand for it? I'm afraid she's goin' to hate me all her life."

"No," Claire answered quietly. "She doesn't hate you. But she doesn't want to go back home, not after what's happened. She's thankful that Jim Marsh isn't going to have another opportunity to get a bank job—and frame some other innocent man like your uncle was framed. If we could take her with us, at least for a while. . . ."

"I'd be proud to," he said huskily. "I'll buy her a brand new piano. I'll do my best to make her forget."

"Couldn't *we* buy her a new piano? But if I find out you've misrepresented that little parcel of Paradise in the foothills—"

"I did," he said. "It won't be really a Paradise till you're there, sharin' it with me. Well, little fiddle player, you've got a beau that's goin' to last you a lifetime." He took her in his arms, held her close.

From the window of the hotel room, Rita looked toward the creek and saw that embracing couple. To herself she whispered, "Dear little Claire! You deserve a man as fine as Buck Bronson. Why couldn't I have married a man like that? A real man! But, dear me, I'm young yet. Maybe some day—"

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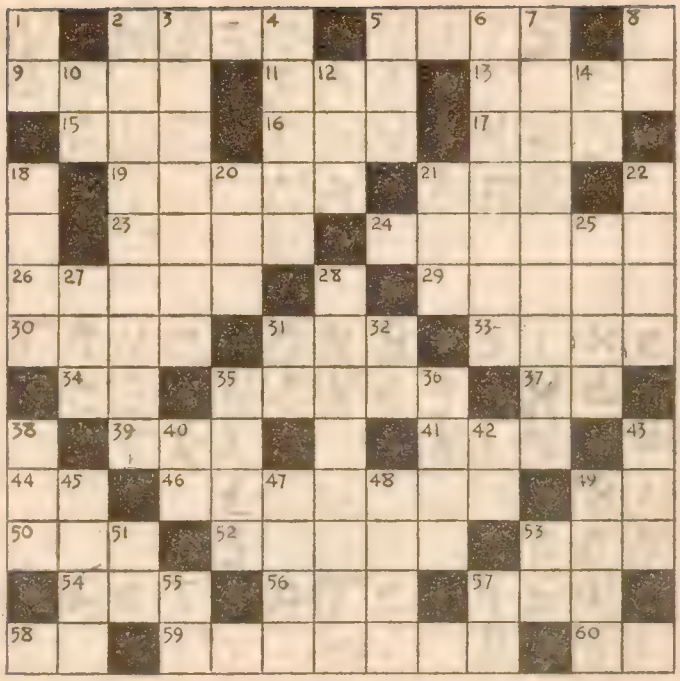
THE WESTERNERS' Crossword Puzzle



The solution to this puzzle will appear in the next issue.

ACROSS

2. To drive stray cattle back into a herd
5. Crazy (Slang)
9. Soon
11. Sound made by sheep
13. The summit
15. A fermented malt liquor
16. The measure of electrical resistance
17. Medical (Abbrev.)
19. Portents
21. April (Abbrev.)
23. The European rabbit
24. Slinks
26. Bark-colored horses
29. An association of Russian laborers
30. Not false
31. A globe
33. A male parent
34. Civil Service (Abbrev.)
35. Land measures
37. Belonging to
39. Prefix meaning "three"
41. A relative
44. Like
46. One who hits a heavy blow
49. Prefix meaning "two"
50. A mean fellow
52. A reserve
53. A long time
54. To obtain
56. Consumed
57. Not old
58. The person speaking
59. To become unstitched
60. Yes (Spanish)

DOWN

1. Virginia (Abbrev.)
2. A sacrifice wholly consumed by fire
3. A wind flower
4. A heavy, black wood
5. To escape (Slang)
6. Those who live in tents
7. A surgical treatment
8. A bovine quadruped
10. North America (Abbrev.)
12. Exclamations of delight
14. Edition (Abbrev.)
18. To select the same kind
20. Printer's half-measures
21. A collection of anecdotes
22. Land surrounded by water
25. A cutting of wool in shearing
27. The grampus
28. To supply water artificially
31. Ocean (Abbrev.)
32. To exist
35. Is not well
36. A narrow runner for gliding on snow
38. An important Army corp for women (Abbrev.)
40. Rupees (Abbrev.)
42. Ireland (Abbrev.)
43. To triumph
45. Wise
47. The poison tree of Java
48. Increased in size
49. Bends from the waist
51. Prefix meaning "down"
53. Electrical Engineer (Abbrev.)
55. Tungsten (Abbrev.)
57. North Dakota (Abbrev.)

Solution to Second October Puzzle

The Noose Hangs High

THE STORY SO FAR:

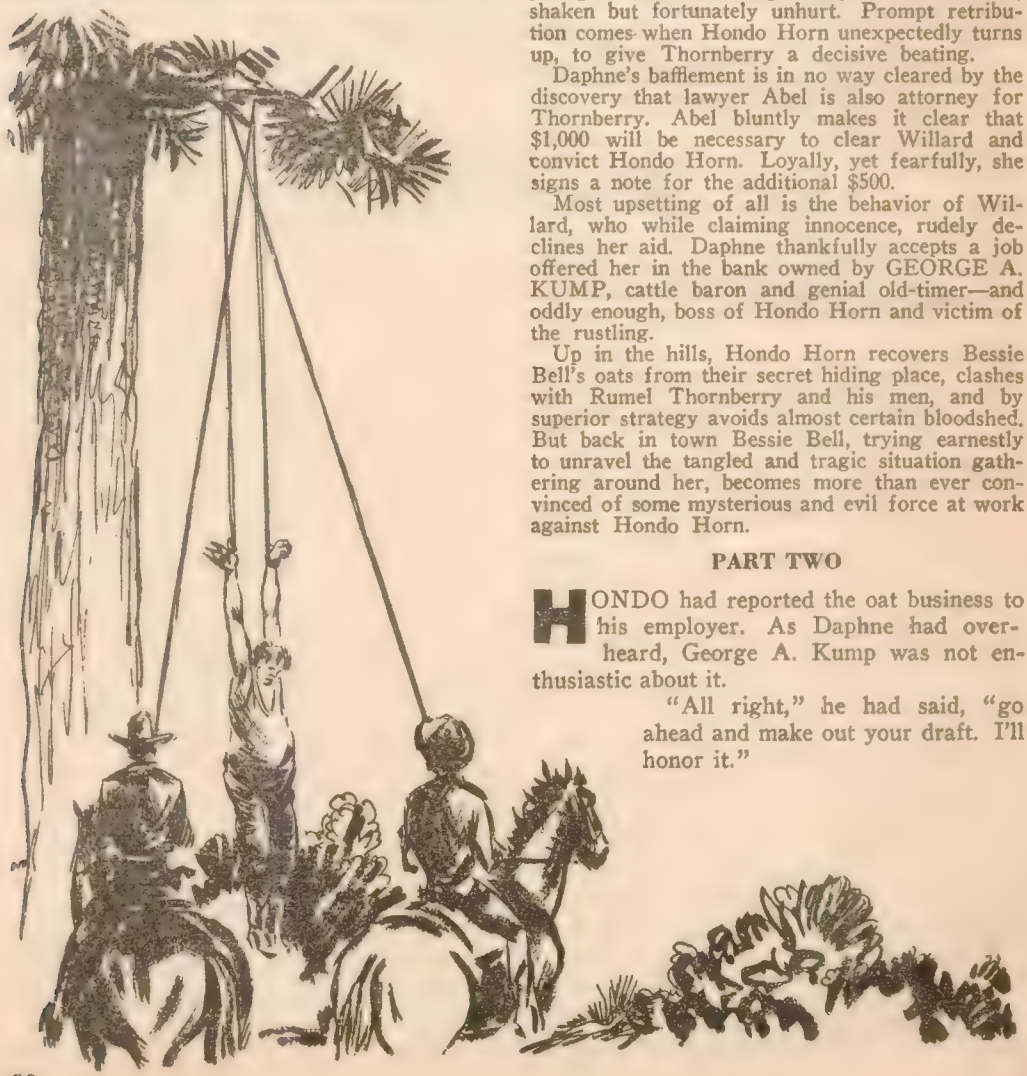
With the $500 which is all her young life's savings DAPHNE DIXON comes to the cattle town of Highline, rallying to the aid of her young brother, WILLARD DIXON, in the lock-up on a charge of cattle stealing. Summoned by a letter from an attorney, known locally as "SLICK" ABEL, Daphne is embarrassed that her first acquaintance and friend in this strange country should prove to be a young widow frankly in love with the ranch foreman, HONDO HORN, whom Abel and certain others are determined to prove the true culprit. She is BESSIE BELL, owner of the Bell Feed & Livery Co. Her husband, Tim Bell, had been killed the year before on a hunting trip—under circumstances never fully explained.

Daphne's very introduction to Highline is one of bewildering violence. RUMEL THORNBERRY, a rancher of unsavory reputation, has hijacked Bessie Bell's latest shipment of oats. He offers to pay, but Bessie demands return of the oats. Jeering, Thornberry roughly causes a runaway of the team and buggy in which the young women are riding. They are thrown out, shaken but fortunately unhurt. Prompt retribution comes when Hondo Horn unexpectedly turns up, to give Thornberry a decisive beating.

Daphne's bafflement is in no way cleared by the discovery that lawyer Abel is also attorney for Thornberry. Abel bluntly makes it clear that $1,000 will be necessary to clear Willard and convict Hondo Horn. Loyally, yet fearfully, she signs a note for the additional $500.

Most upsetting of all is the behavior of Willard, who while claiming innocence, rudely declines her aid. Daphne thankfully accepts a job offered her in the bank owned by GEORGE A. KUMP, cattle baron and genial old-timer—and oddly enough, boss of Hondo Horn and victim of the rustling.

Up in the hills, Hondo Horn recovers Bessie Bell's oats from their secret hiding place, clashes with Rumel Thornberry and his men, and by superior strategy avoids almost certain bloodshed. But back in town Bessie Bell, trying earnestly to unravel the tangled and tragic situation gathering around her, becomes more than ever convinced of some mysterious and evil force at work against Hondo Horn.



PART TWO

HONDO had reported the oat business to his employer. As Daphne had overheard, George A. Kump was not enthusiastic about it.

"All right," he had said, "go ahead and make out your draft. I'll honor it."

by Frank C. Robertson

Hondo and Pat soon arose to go. "By the way," Hondo said, "I got the hospital bunch up in Swan Basin yesterday."

"Any trouble?" Kump asked suspiciously.

"Not to any extent. Brig Dow and a bunch of Thornberry's friends tried to stampede a bunch of Dow's Texas longhorns through us and I had to shoot a couple."

"All right," George A said, "I'll back you up in anything you do."

They left through the lobby then, leaving Daphne uncertain whether Hondo had shot a couple of steers or a couple of men.

"I sort of gleaned the idee that that girl in there don't like you much, Hondo," Pat said when they were outside.

"She may not," Hondo said dubiously. "I may have some rough ploughin' there."

"What do you mean?"

"Ever fall in love with a photograph, Pat?"

"Hell, no!"

"I did. That's what I mean."

While Pat was still puzzling over this remark, they met Sheriff John Watson. The sheriff stopped them. While his remarks were all addressed to Hondo, his eyes dwelt almost constantly upon Pat.

"I hear you had some trouble out there yesterday, Hondo," he said.

"Who was telling you that, Sheriff?"

"Brig Dow. Claims you killed two of his steers, and kept him from getting his herd into Swan Basin. That's government land you know, Hondo."

"Look, Sheriff. The shoe was on the other foot. They tried to stop us. They stampeded them longhorns to do up the bunch of weak stuff we were driving. I shot two steers to turn the stampede. I'll argue the case with Dow in any manner he wants to name. You should know me better."

"I don't doubt you're right," the sheriff said almost apologetically, "but I've got to investigate. You know Brig Dow wants my office."

"You want me to plead guilty so you can save some votes?"

"Don't go flyin' off the handle with me, Hondo," the sheriff said patiently. "You're in pretty bad as it is, and you need my friendship. If a jury finds that Dixon kid not guilty

you know what to expect. Who's your friend?"

"Pat Young. We started riding together when we were kids. Known each other a long time," Hondo said curtly.

"I see. Thought his face looked familiar."

The sheriff passed on.

"Well, Hondo, looks like it's time for Patrick to roll his soogans," Pat said.

"Why?" Hondo demanded. "Nobody's got anything on you. I got troubles, too, but I'm not running from 'em."

Pat said nothing, and they entered a saloon.

Hondo was not taken altogether by surprise when the two Thornberrys, and a half dozen of their friends barged into the saloon.

"Looks like trouble," Pat murmured as the group advanced upon the bar; Ez and Rumel Thornberry on the flank next to Hondo and Pat, with Brig Dow next to them.

"What'll you have, gents?" the worried bartender inquired.

"Whiskey," Ez Thornberry roared. "For everybody from here up." He had very pointedly not included the two men already at the end of the bar, although two or three other men who had been drinking there were included.

AS THE bartender started to set out glasses Hondo and Pat replaced their beer glasses on the bar and started to leave.

"Just a minute, Horn," Ez Thornberry said loudly. "Got a little matter o' business to discuss with you."

"I didn't know we had any business, Thornberry."

"I think you did. I'm givin' you till just dark tonight to haul them oats back. And I'm not waiting any longer."

"What oats?" Hondo queried gently.

"You know what oats," the man's voice rose angrily. "The oats you stole from our new salt cabin."

"I'm afraid you're barking up the wrong tree, as usual, Thornberry. I've stolen no oats from you or anybody else." Hondo started away, but Ez Thornberry seized his lapel. Hondo swung about, and his grey eyes narrowed dangerously.

"Never do that," he almost whispered, and Thornberry let go.

"This is one time you over-reached yourself, Horn," the man said. "You see, we been talkin' to one o' your punchers, an' he told us all about you sendin' wagons onto private land in the night an' haulin' them oats away."

"It was a nice stunt, puttin' Bess Bell up to makin' a five hundred dollar bet with Ez that she'd get the oats back, an' then you stealin' 'em, but it won't work," Rumel put in.

"If there's any question of stealing, then you're the boys to look out," Hondo said quietly. "You did steal that grain from Bessie. If she got it back she had the law behind her. Ask Ace Gillette."

"Listen, Horn!" Ez roared, "you can't steal what you pay for. We offered that woman a check, and it's still posted with our attorney. We want them oats back. If they ain't back by dark we're comin' after 'em."

"That'll be just dandy," Hondo said.

Hondo started on, then stopped. "You said you were talking to one of my men. Who was it?"

"You'll know when you see him," Ez Thornberry said.

"I've got a feeling, Thornberry, that I'm going to have to kill you one of these times," Hondo said deliberately, ignoring Pat Young's tug at his sleeve.

The two friends were untying their horses when George A. came out of the bank. The old cattleman looked anxious.

"The Thornberrys are in," he said. "You had any trouble?"

"Not yet. They claim they're coming after that grain if we don't haul it back," Hondo responded.

The old man passed his huge hand over his homely face, and caressed his red neck in a characteristic gesture.

"Let 'em come," he rumbled. "I'm about fed up too."

"Don't worry, they'll not show up," Hondo said.

THEY mounted and rode to the feed store. Bessie, an anxious expression on her face, awaited them.

"I'm going to call that bet off, Hondo," she said. "I'll let old Ez keep his five hundred dollars. I wish I'd let him keep the grain."

"I don't," Hondo said. "This is a free country. A man don't have to sell anybody anything if he don't want to."

"But there'll be trouble, Hondo."

"Of course. Rumel taking that grain from your drivers wasn't just to get a few oats. Can't you see that? Everything the Thornberrys do has a purpose. It all fits into a

pattern—a pattern woven for 'em by a smart crook named Slick Abel."

"It's too deep for me. I only know I'm afraid something will happen to you," Bessie said honestly.

"Everything they do is designed to look like George A. Kump is running the country and making it tough on the smaller fellows—like them. They're making Sheriff Watson look like an inefficient old goat. They think when they get me behind bars, everything can be settled their way at the ballot box. But I've got another idea."

"I don't like the mood you're in, Hondo," Bessie said flatly. "They want to trick you into starting something, and like a fool I've played into their hands."

"The grain business is settled. All you've got to do is cash my draft at the bank, and collect your bet. But there is some unfinished business."

"Don't crowd 'em, Hondo."

"Would you say that if you knew they had murdered your husband?" Hondo asked.

"Hunh? What did you say?" Bessie gasped.

"Tim Bell was my friend," Hondo said. "Other people may believe he was accidentally shot by some greenhorn deerhunter like they claim, but I don't believe it, and I never have."

"Have you got any evidence at all?" Bessie asked.

They were inside the office now, and Pat Young stood in the doorway looking at them with half amused, half cynical interest.

"No," Hondo said shortly. "Nothing that would hold good in a court."

"Come clean, Hondo," Bessie ordered. "As Tim's widow I'm slightly interested, you know. What're you holding back?"

"A lie," he replied gravely. "Just a lie—maybe a couple of 'em."

Bessie seated herself behind her desk, waiting. Her plump cheeks had gone a little white. "Who do you think did it? Have you any idea, Hondo?" she inquired.

"I don't know. I don't want to stir you up, Bessie, but I've never thought Tim was killed accidentally, although it does happen sometimes. When we find out who did it, I think that like all the other things that have happened, it'll tie up."

They went out, with Pat Young looking more puzzled than ever. "I don't get it," he said finally. "Who the hell do you think murdered Bell—if he was murdered."

"Let's wait till tomorrow. Maybe we'll find out more about it."

IT WAS sundown when they got back to to the ranch. They unsaddled and turned their mounts loose to roll, then went directly to the bunkhouse. Most of the men were in. They watched Hondo uneasily without speaking. He glanced swiftly over the interior of the long log room, then walked directly over to where someone lay on a bunk with his face toward the wall.

"Turn over, Owen," he said grimly, "and tell me how it happened."

The boy in the bunk uttered a choking sob, but didn't move.

"He can't very well, Hondo," old Ben Rambeau spoke up. "They riddled his back. We bandaged him up as good as we could."

"Looks like they used bridle reins—the chain ends," Spike Williams offered.

"I didn't want to tell 'em anything. I tried not to," the young puncher cried. "I guess I fainted once. When I come to they started in again, an' I couldn't stand it. I had to tell 'em it was our wagons got that grain, but I didn't mention any names."

Hondo and Pat exchanged glances.

"It's all right, Owen," Hondo said. "You ought to have told 'em before they did all that to you." He leaned over and saw that the boy's face had been beaten, too. "You take it easy till you get well. Your pay will go on just the same. Who was in the party?"

"Both Thornberrys. It was Ez done most of the whippin'—him an' Ozark. Lafe Lufkin, Heb Giles, an' Walk Thurgood was there, too. They jumped me before I knew they was around," Owen explained feebly.

The two he last mentioned were a pair of unsavory nesters who were usually fawning at the heels of Brig Dow and the Thornberrys.

Hondo withdrew. "Better go fetch Doc Beck," he told Spike Williams. "He may be hurt worse than we think."

Pat Young had followed him outside. "That kid is a hell of a lot grittier than some of them skunks up the creek are," he said meaningly.

"Just what I was thinking, Pat," Hondo replied grimly. "Just what I was thinking."

THAT had been a hectic day at the Highline State Bank. Daphne was still tingling with indignation as a result of what she had overheard Hondo Horn say, when the sheriff came in. He, too, passed into the little

semi-private office at the back. Daphne listened attentively.

"Just saw Hondo," the sheriff said.

"Yes, he just left here."

"Who was the waddy with him?"

"Name's Pat Young. Old friend of Hondo's. Good man, I hear."

The sheriff's next words made Daphne fairly jump.

"George A." Watson inquired grimly, "did you ever know that Hondo Horn had served time?"

After Daphne's first startled gasp she held her breath, waiting for the banker's reply. It was slow in coming, but his voice was calm and even when he did reply.

"Yes, John, I know all about it. Hondo told me the whole story when I asked him to be my foreman, and I took the trouble to find out if he was telling the truth. He was convicted for helping to rob a bank, but he only served about six months when he was pardoned. The real bandit voluntarily came forward and confessed the crime."

"That's about the way I got it. Remember the real thief's name?"

"No. Why?"

"I dunno. His name wasn't Pat Young, but I saw the picture of the fellow, and it looked a lot like this bird Young. And if Young ain't an ex-con then I never saw one. I know his breed."

"The implication is that if it comes out, people will think Hondo was in with him on the job, and that Young just took the rap. Is that it?" Kump asked angrily.

"It won't look good for Hondo when the Dixon case comes on for trial."

"The Dixon case?"

Daphne knew then that Kump had just remembered her presence.

"I don't give a damn what it looks like, John, I'm backing Hondo to the limit," Kump declared positively.

"And it's my duty to find out all the facts in the case I can," the sheriff said.

"And yet people have the audacity to say that you take orders from me," Kump said bitterly.

"I reckon I do owe my election to your support, and now it looks like I'll lose it. But while I'm sheriff I do my duty as I see it," Watson said.

"And that's why Slick Abel and his outfit mean to throw you out of office," Kump said. "Well, John, there's no hard feelin's. We both belong to the old school, so we know where we stand."

Daphne regarded the stoop-shouldered old sheriff with new interest as he shuffled out. Despite what Abel had said she no longer regarded him as an enemy.

A FEW minutes later the old man entered the main office of the bank. Daphne noticed that his tread was heavy, as though he was physically tired.

"You better run along now, Miss Dixon," he said. "I almost forgot. Tomorrow's Sunday. May find it dull in Highline. If you want to take a ride, I keep a gentle mare over in Bessie's livery stable. You're welcome to use her."

He was kind. Daphne could not have blamed him at all had he told her he didn't need her any more. She almost wished she hadn't heard anything at the bank, but for Willard's sake she had information that had to be imparted to Mr. Abel.

She went immediately to the lawyer's office. His greeting was considerably more informal than usual.

"Hello, Daphne, my dear," he said. "Come right in. How's the work?"

"It's not difficult," she said stiffly. "I won't sit. I want to see Willard right away."

"Anything on your mind?"

Hurriedly she told him about Hondo's visit to the bank, and then the sheriff's. Abel's eyes grew brighter as she talked.

"So friend Hondo is a jailbird!" he exclaimed. "That won't hurt your brother's case at all when I get Horn on the witness stand."

"I wish the trial were over," she said.

"It soon will be," he said. "The defense is ready. We go to trial in a couple of days."

"So soon? I thought it would be much longer."

"No, I was going to ask for an extension, but instead I'll tell the judge we are ready."

"I'm glad of that," Daphne said.

She found Ace Gillette, the good looking young deputy, on duty at the courthouse. He acceded readily to her request to see Willard. Her brother was in a better mood this time, and asked her how she liked her job.

"It's not at all difficult, but it makes me feel like a spy," she said. "However, I found out something today that will help our case."

"What's that?"

"Hondo Horn is an ex-convict. He was

pardoned, but now it seems like he might have been guilty after all. When we prove that, the jury is sure to believe he was the thief."

Willard remained silent.

"But that's not the best news I've got. That witness who saw Hondo give you the money is going to testify."

"I told you Bill Burgess nor nobody else saw Hondo give me any money," he said angrily.

"But he *did,* Willard. You just happened not to see him. He was in the back room of that saloon, and overheard everything that was said. Look—here's his deposition, in case anything happens to him."

Willard took the deposition and read it with an air of incredulity.

"How much did you pay him to swear to this?" he asked cynically.

"A thousand dollars. I had to. Oh, Willard, I don't mind the money. Clearing your name is all I care about."

"Well," he said sardonically, "it don't look like Slick Abel has missed any bets."

"Willard, you act like you hated your attorney! He's doing the very best he can to get you acquitted."

He sullenly rolled a cigarette. Plainly he wanted her to go.

"I con't understand you, Willard," she said, on the verge of tears. "You claim Hondo Horn gave you that money in the back room of the Senate Saloon, and yet you seem to be angry because there is a witness to prove your story."

"Oh, shut up, and get the hell out of here!" he cried rudely.

Hurt more deeply, perhaps, than she had ever been in her life, Daphne stepped to the door of the cell and motioned blindly for Ace Gillette to let her out.

SHE didn't sleep much that night, and she dreaded the long, inactive day that lay ahead. She couldn't bring herself to see Willard again so soon. Maybe if she didn't see him for a few days, he'd be more reasonable.

Then she remembered George A.'s offer to lend her a horse. She liked to ride, and it would be a blessed relief to get away from everything for a while. As soon as she had made a pretense of eating breakfast she put on her hat and coat and hurried down to the Bell livery stable.

Being Sunday, the feed store was closed. She asked the hostler in the stable if Mrs. Bell was around.

"No, ma'am. Sundays Bessie generally stays home."

"Mr. Kump told me he kept a mare here that I could use," she said.

The hostler presently led out a neat little sorrel mare wearing what had once been an expensive side-saddle. Daphne was used to horses, but her riding had been astride. She knew Bessie would gladly lend her a divided skirt, but she was too proud to ask favors while she was engaged in trying to send the man Bessie loved to prison.

The mare was easy-gaited, and Daphne found herself enjoying the ride, and delighted with the scenery as she went from one timbered canyon to another, getting many miles further from town than she realized. She was Westerner enough to keep track of her directions, but she was getting into a wider country than she had bargained for.

And then, suddenly, a cry, the most ghastly she had ever heard, beat upon her ears. It made her blood run cold. For a minute she didn't know whether it was human or animal. Then it came again, and this time she knew that it was undeniably human.

Someone was in trouble. She was scared stiff, but the demands of common humanity were not to be denied. She knew in which direction the sounds had come from, and she urged the mare forward at a swift trot, her hooves making scarcely any sound over the thick, slippery pine grass.

She saw a clump of tall pines through the aspens, but now the hillside tipped so steeply that she had to draw the mare down to a walk. She forced her way through the aspens, and suddenly saw a small clearing surrounding the clump of pines. Nor was that all. What froze her whole body with horror and made her tongue cleave to the roof of her mouth was the sight of a man dangling from the limb of a tree with nothing beneath his feet but vacant space.

There were two men on horseback watching the man's frenzied struggles, and as she saw them the man again gave that fearful cry. Then she recognized the two hangmen. They were Hondo Horn, and his friend, Pat Young!

"You cowards!" she cried out. "You contemptible cowards!"

The hanging man had swung around so that he could see her.

"Help! Help!" he bellowed.

As yet it hadn't occurred to her that if the man was being strangled by a rope that he couldn't yell for help.

"Company, Hondo," Pat said. "What d'ye know!"

THEN only did Daphne see that the unfortunate victim was hanging by his arms, by two ropes. Yet it was torture, and a rather ingenious form of the same. One rope was fastened around the man's wrist, and it went up over a tree limb and down to the horn of Pat Young's saddle, where it was dallied. But the other rope was fastened only to a thumb. It went over the limb the same way, and was dallied to the horn of Hondo's saddle. Right now Hondo's rope was almost slack so that the fellow's weight was all upon his wrist. But if Pat should slack away and Hondo tighten his dallies the weight would all be upon the thumb, and excruciating agony would result.

"Fer Gawd's sake, miss, make 'em quit!" the hanging man pleaded. "They're killin' me by inches."

"I told you we shoulda gagged him for a while. His kind yells too easy," Pat remarked.

Daphne didn't know exactly what she could do, but she drove her horse forward with the idea of getting her horse where the man could rest his weight on it. But Hondo was too quick for her. He slipped his rope from the saddle horn, passed it over to Pat, and caught her horse by the bit.

"Since you've butted in on the show we'll give you a grand-stand seat, but you can't take the stage," he told her grimly.

The big, dull looking fellow swinging underneath the limb was making the air vibrate with his piteous clamor. Daphne didn't know who he was, but she thought she had seen him in Highline.

Hondo swung down, and before she knew what he was up to he had lifted her from the saddle.

"You beast! You vile, murderous beast!" she screamed at him. Then she became paralyzed with terror as holding her by one arm with ridiculous ease, he dragged her over to where a third horse stood, and began to take a lasso rope from the saddle. For a minute she thought he might be going to hang her too.

He dropped the noose of the rope over her head and pinned her arms to her body. In desperation she made a futile grab at the handle of his sixgun.

"You caught you a regular wildcat," Pat Young said admiringly.

Hondo dragged her over to a smaller tree, and bound her to it so that she faced the hanging man.

"I hope you don't scream, because I'd hate to have to put a gag in your mouth," he told her unrelentingly.

She didn't answer. She saw now that the man had been stripped of his shirt, and she noticed a long black-whip coiled over a broken limb of the same tree. Across the thin undershirt she could see a single thin dirty smear.

"All right, Ozark, ready to talk now, or do we go on with the show?" Hondo asked.

The man had lapsed into sudden silence.

Hondo remounted his horse and took back his rope. "Slacken away," he ordered Pat, and suddenly the man's weight was transferred from his left wrist to his right thumb.

Daphne saw the man's eyes almost start from his head with the agony. He bit his lower lip for a second, and then a yell that dwarfed all his previous efforts burst from his throat.

Daphne fainted.

IT WAS not sadism which caused Hondo to force the girl to witness what was about to take place. He was nauseated himself by the task he had set himself to do, and he felt extreme pity for her. But now that she had blundered onto the scene he knew that his only chance for justification lay in compelling her to witness the results.

His anger against his brutal enemies had been increased by the results of Dr. Beck's examination of Owen Denny. In addition to the frightful whipping he had received, it was the doctor's opinion that one of the boy's kidneys had been kicked loose. The doctor had insisted upon taking Owen back to town with him, and there was a chance that he might have to operate.

"Who kicked you, Owen?" Hondo asked.

"It was that damned Ozark," Owen replied. "He kicked me twice."

That Sunday morning Hondo and Pat rode away from the ranch together. It was almost noon when they saw the man they were looking for. Ozark, as usual, was fighting his horse, a half-broken bronco, when they saw him coming down a trail. It was brush country, and they turned aside quickly, one on

each side of the trail. Pat had his rope on the fellow before Ozark knew that there was anyone within miles of him.

They had taken the ruffian back to the nearest large trees. He had cursed and threatened, but no word did he get out of them until he stood beneath the tree limb with the ropes on him. First, however, they had removed his coat and shirt.

Hondo told him quietly what they were going to do. To emphasize it he took down the black-whip they had brought along for that purpose, and gave the fellow one quick, stinging lash that ran around his body like fire. It brought the first yell from Ozark.

"You helped torture Owen Denny yesterday," Hondo said. "He says you were the worst one. Doc Beck says you kicked one of his kidneys loose. But that ain't what we're after you for."

"What're you goin' to do to me?" the bully bleated then.

"We're going to hang you up by one thumb. If that one pulls out by the roots we'll put the rope on the other one. If we have to, we'll take the last bit of hide off your back with this black-whip. That is unless you tell us."

"Tell yuh what?" Ozark growled.

"Who murdered Tim Bell?" Hondo shot out.

Ozark's great heavy jaw sagged; his sly, piggish little eyes betrayed surprise—and fear. He gulped twice, and only a suggestive writhing of the black-whip brought a stammering answer from him.

"H-how should I know? W-wasn't he killed accidental?"

"You know damn well he wasn't," Hondo charged. "He was murdered, and you know who done it. I think you were picked to do the job because you're the best rifle shot in the country."

"You're crazy," the man muttered, but he couldn't seem to get his slack jaws to stop clicking.

"What happened was," Hondo said as if talking to Pat, "Tim met up with the Thornberrys at an old prospector's cabin at the head of Swan Basin. They got in a poker game, and as usual Tim took all their money. The next morning they laid for him and shot him with a rifle so it would look like somebody had mistaken him for a deer. Now you go on from there, Ozark."

"I don't know nothin', and I won't tell nothin'," the fellow said stubbornly.

"Then I reckon we'll have to do some persuading, Pat," Hondo said, and there was genuine reluctance in his voice.

THEY had just begun to work on him when Daphne Dixon made her unfortunate appearance.

"Look," Pat exclaimed when the girl fainted. "What'll we do?"

"Go ahead," Hondo said grimly. "She'll come to. If we have to kill this hombre, we'd better do it while she's unconscious.

"Stop! I can't stand any more!" Ozark yelled as his weight once more came upon his macerated thumb. "I'll talk."

They promptly shifted his weight back to his wrist.

"He was murdered," the fellow blubbered. "It was like you said, only—"

"Who shot him?" Hondo rasped out.

"The Dixon kid. He was—"

The report of a rifle cut short the sentence. Ozark's body seemed to leap in the air, and then he was a dead, inert weight upon Pat's rope.

Momentarily too stunned to do anything else, the men slipped their dallies and allowed the body to fall to the ground. There was a smear of blood on the front of Ozark's undershirt, and a rapidly spreading larger one on the back. He had been centered by a bullet.

Hondo looked at Ozark, and then he looked at Daphne. The girl had come out of her faint, and was looking at the body of the dead man with frozen horror!

Then her gaze turned to Hondo with inexpressible loathing. "You—you murderer!" she whispered.

Already Pat had gone in search of the man who had murdered Ozark, but in that brushy, timbered section there was little or no chance that he could be found.

Hondo went over and released Daphne from the tree. "We didn't kill him," he said dully.

"Why lie to me?" she cried out furiously. "I'm not blind. Now I suppose you'll murder me to cover up your crime."

It was the rifle shot that had brought Daphne out of her faint. She hadn't heard anything that Ozark said. But Hondo didn't know that. He thought she had heard the man accuse her brother of murder. To save him, she would persistently contend that he Pat had murdered Ozark.

"No," he said wearily, "we're not going to

murder you. You're free to go any time you want, but you had better let us show you the way to a trail. You might get lost."

Her handbag had fallen on the ground while Hondo was tying her up and it had come open. A long, folded sheet of paper had fallen out of it. Hondo picked up the bag, and then the paper. It came unfolded in his hand. and his eyes suddenly fastened upon his own name.

The document he scanned was a deposition by Bill Burgess swearing that he had seen and overheard Hondo Horn giving Willard Dixon money with which to buy hay from Sep Kohler.

Daphne stood watching him read the deposition. "It won't do you any good to destroy it, because Mr. Burgess will make another one," she declared.

He knew what this meant. If Burgess swore to that story on the stand, or even this deposition was presented, young Dixon would be acquitted, and Hondo would promptly be arrested, unless the story was broken down.

"You can have it back," he said. "It must have cost you quite a lot of money."

Daphne flushed guiltily. She was frightened and shocked. She wanted to run, but didn't quite dare.

METHODICALLY Hondo lifted the big body of Ozark and lashed it firmly across the man's own saddle. He had just finished when Pat returned.

"He got away," Pat said regretfully. "From the signs I take it he had been following sweetheart here."

"A good guess then it would be Rumel Thornberry, but we can't prove it," Hondo said.

"You're takin' Ozark?"

"Nothing else to do."

Hondo held the sorrel mare while Daphne mounted, but he didn't offer to assist her, and she would have shrunk at the touch of his hand.

She followed along behind the two men as they travelled single-file down the steep slope. An hour and a half later they came upon a road several miles below where Swan Creek left its canyon.

"All you have to do now, Miss Dixon, is follow this road. It'll take you right into Highline. And I'm sorry this had to happen in your presence," Hondo said.

She rode past them, and as soon as she was well ahead of them set the sorrel mare at a gallop.

"That was foolish," Pat said. "She'll tell her yarn, and we'll meet a reception committee with ropes."

"I want her to tell her story first," Hondo said. "Only I hope it is to the sheriff, and not to Slick Abel."

"Where are we goin'?" Pat asked.

"We're going to take this carrion home—where it belongs. If only one of 'em is missing we'll know he is the murderer."

They turned back the other way, and were soon in sight of the Thornberry ranch. Now that Ozark's mount was headed home they no longer led it. They turned into a short lane leading from the main road to the Thornberry buildings, and at the end of the lane they were seen.

Four men came off the shaded east porch of the squat log house. They were Ezra Thornberry, Brig Dow, Gus Marks—and Slick Abel.

Hondo and Pat stopped in the yard, while Brig Dow went over and caught the horse carrying the dead man.

"There's your dog, Thornberry," Hondo said. "You can do as you please with it."

"What—what does this mean?" Abel spluttered. "This looks like murder."

"Right you are, Slick, and you may have some fun getting Rumel off."

Their astonished looks showed him that they had beaten the murderer back to the ranch, and since Rumel was not there it seemed certain that he or Lafe Lufkin was the murderer—and the odds were on Rumel.

"What yuh givin' us? Rumel wouldn't kill Ozark," Ez contended.

"Not even to keep him from telling us all about the way Tim Bell was murdered?" Hondo laughed harshly, mirthlessly. "You can tell Rumel," he said, "that he was a bit too late. Ozark had already talked."

THEY swung about, but as they retreated they kept their eyes upon the men until they were half way down the lane. Then they let their horses out to a lope.

"Well, where now?" Pat queried.

"To town."

"Not me," Pat said quietly. "I got to tell you something, Hondo. Something I feel like a dog for having to tell. I lied to you when I said I just wanted a place where I'd have a chance to go straight."

"How's that, Pat?"

"I led you to think I'd been pardoned. I wasn't. I broke out of the pen. Nobody was killed, but there was a guard or two got a cracked head. It'll be life for me if I'm caught, likely. I'm sorry I done you dirt."

"It's all right, Pat. I owe you plenty for coming back of your own free will when you found out I was serving time for what you done."

"If we hadn't been friends in the first place I never would have done it," Pat said. "And you drug me out of a river once, remember?"

"You'd better pull your freight, Pat."

"I aim to. And you'd better come with me."

"I'll stick it out."

"I can't see a chance to beat this rap, and that sheriff will soon have the goods on me anyway. But I reckon I'll stick around to see how this comes out."

"Listen. Sep Kohler is still herding sheep, and his cabin has been empty ever since Willard Dixon was arrested there. There's bound to be some grub left. You hang out around there a day or so, and if I'm in jail I'll have the old man send Spike Williams out with supplies. You can trust Spike," Hondo stated.

"You got a lot of confidence in Kump, too, ain't you?"

"He's a guy you can tie to," Hondo replied briefly.

They shook hands and parted. Then Hondo rode on alone toward Highland to face the accusation of murder which Daphne Dixon would surely have brought against him.

DAPHNE was so ill from shock that she could scarcely keep her balance in the side-saddle, yet somehow she managed to keep the sorrel mare at a gallop until Highline loomed into view.

She had to ride past the livery stable, and although she had intended going straight to the courthouse, she stopped when she saw Bessie Bell standing in front of the stable. She was glad to get out of the saddle and go the rest of the way on foot.

"Good heavens, child, what happened?" Bessie cried. "You look as pale as a ghost. Don't tell me Fancy-Foot threw you off."

"No, she was perfect," Daphne said, as she slid to the ground.

"Here, come into the office and sit down. I'll get you a drink of water—or a shot of whiskey."

"No, I can't stop," Daphne refused. "I've got to see the sheriff."

"The sheriff! What happened?"

"Oh, I can't tell *you*," Daphne cried helplessly. "I—I saw something dreadful."

"Something to do with Hondo?" Bessie demanded.

"Yes, yes. He killed a man!"

"I know several he should have killed long ago," Bessie said unemotionally. "Who was it?"

"I don't know. They had whipped him, and then hung him up by his thumbs, and—and finally they—they murdered him."

Bessie stared at her a moment. "You're crazy," she said. "You've been out in the sun too long."

"It's true, I tell you," the girl cried. "That man Hondo tied me up and forced me to watch it."

"Now I know you're crazy!" Bessie said, but Daphne was half way across the street. Bessie ran after her.

Sheriff Watson was just going out to supper, and his deputy was in the office.

"I warn you, Sheriff," Bessie said as they entered. "This girl is crazy as a cuckoo."

"I am perfectly sane," Daphne retorted. "I was tied up to a tree today, and forced to witness the torture and then the murder of a helpless man."

"Well, this sounds interesting," Watson said. "Give the young lady your chair, Ace. Where did this happen, and who was the victim?"

Daphne bit her lip. Plainly the sheriff thought that she was out of her head, or concocting some monstrous lie, as Bessie did.

"I don't know who the victim was, but the murderers were Hondo Horn and Pat Young."

"How come 'em to tie you up?" Watson asked.

"They were torturing the man when I accidentally rode up on them."

"Suppose now you just go ahead and tell us quietly how it all happened," the sheriff suggested.

DAPHNE calmed herself as best she could, told of her ride, and exactly what she saw when she encountered the three men.

"You mean to say he was hanging by his thumbs?" Watson asked.

"That's the way it looked to me. They had two ropes on him, and it seemed to me they

were putting his weight first upon one arm and then the other."

"Then what happened?"

"Hondo gave his rope to the other man, and pulled me off my horse, dragged me over to a tree and tied me there, facing the man."

"Did he say why?"

"He said I might as well see the rest of the show." At last her story was gaining credence. Even Bessie showed signs of conviction—and unhappiness.

"Before you go on, tell us just what this victim looked like."

"He was a big man, light-haired, with small eyes."

"Did you notice his horse and saddle?" Gillette broke in.

"Yes. His horse was a bay with stocking legs. I remember it was covered with lather, and there was blood on its flanks where it had been spurred," Daphne remembered.

"Looks like the man might have been indulging in a little of torture of his horse, too," the sheriff said.

"Ozark," Ace Gillette said succinctly.

The sheriff nodded. "Go on, Miss Dixon."

"After they tied me, they drew the man up, and he screamed so dreadfully I—well, I guess I fainted. Then I seemed to hear a shot, and when I looked up the man was falling."

"What happened after that?"

"Hondo released me. The other man went away, but he came back and said he couldn't catch whoever had fired the shot. He claimed somebody had been following me, but I don't believe there was any other man," Daphne asserted.

"Humph!" Bessie snorted. "We won't get the truth about this till Hondo gets in." She turned to Daphne. "If he had murdered that man like you say, do you think he would have been fool enough to let you live to tell about it?"

"I thought he would kill me, but he didn't," Daphne acknowledged.

"Did he threaten you?" the sheriff asked quickly.

"No."

"Where is the body?"

"They brought it down to the road. I came on ahead. I suppose they are bringing it in."

"Sheriff, I think I'll get Doc Beck and start out," Gillette said.

"Yes, you'd better," the sheriff agreed. "Now, Miss Dixon, is there anything you *haven't* told us about this business?"

Daphne flushed. "Only one thing, I think," she said. "My handbag had fallen open, and a paper fell out of it. Hondo Horn picked the paper up and read it."

"What was in it?"

"It was the deposition of a witness for my brother in his coming trial. But he gave it back to me. If you'd like to see it—"

The sheriff nodded and reached out his hand. Daphne handed over the deposition. His shaggy eyebrows lifted as he read the document.

"You're sure he read this?" he inquired.

"Yes."

"Well, I suppose it wouldn't have done him any good to tear it up. If this is true, then it certainly clears your brother and convicts Hondo of stealin' them cattle," Watson said.

"And if he would steal cattle he would commit murder to cover it up," Daphne declared.

Bessie fairly snatched the paper from the sheriff's hand and scanned it hurriedly. "This is a damnable lie!" she cried, too angry to give way to tears.

"I don't think so," Daphne stated.

"Did you examine the dead man closely, Miss Dixon?" the sheriff asked.

"No-o, I tried to keep my eyes off—it—as much as possible."

"Tell us what you did notice."

DAPHNE made an effort to recall Ozark's appearance. "I know he was wearing only an undershirt. There was a dark ring around it where he had been hit with a whip. I remember that there was blood on the front of his shirt, and when they tied him face downward across the saddle I know his whole back was a great smear of blood."

"You say you heard the shot and came out of your faint. Did you see a gun in either man's hand?" the sheriff persisted.

"No, I didn't," she said, "but what does it matter? They were brutally torturing the man, whether they killed him or not."

"There was another torture case yesterday, my girl," the sheriff said sadly. "A nineteen-year-old boy was brutally whipped with bridle-chains, beaten and kicked, so that his health may be ruined all his life. But Hondo didn't do that. If the man you saw killed was who we thought it was, he was one of the men who kicked Owen Denny, and used bridle-chains to whip him. But of course that doesn't mean that Hondo was justified in taking the law into his own hands for revenge."

Daphne felt completely let down. She was physically tired from the ride, the harrowing things she had seen had wrecked her nerves, and now complete reaction had set in. Her head fell over on the sheriff's desk, and she gave way to long, body-wracking sobs.

"Better let me handle her, Sheriff," Bessie said. "You go and send up a rig from my stable."

Daphne's sobs were more restrained when Bessie's hostler, Hank, drove up to the courthouse door.

"Come now," Bessie said, "this is a public place, and you can't be crying all over it. I've got a buggy outside, and I'm taking you to my place for the night."

"I don't want to go there," Daphne sobbed. "I know you hate me."

"Don't be silly," Bessie said. "Come along."

Daphne dried her eyes and walked out to where the rig waited. After a moment's hesitation she climbed in. She didn't intend to stay long with Bessie, but she dreaded the ordeal of going to the hotel before she had a chance to compose her swollen and tear-streaked face.

Bessie's home was a pretty little place, tastefully furnished.

"You just relax on the couch here, and after a bit you can wash up," Bessie said. "I'll fix us some supper."

"Why should you be good to me?" Daphne asked. "You told me you were in love with Hondo Horn."

"I still am, and always will be. And you're his enemy, because you're being fooled. All right. I'm not afraid of you. If you wasn't his enemy, then I might be scared. In that case you would have to look out."

Presently Daphne took a bath, and after supper she made only mild protest when Bessie insisted that she sleep in the spare bedroom.

SHE was surprised when she awakened the next morning to find that she had slept soundly all night. The crisp odor of frying bacon and eggs seeped in from Bessie's kitchen.

She dressed hurriedly, washed her face and hands and entered the kitchen.

Bessie looked up soberly. "Feel better?" she asked.

"Yes, I feel fine. You've treated me awfully nice. You shouldn't have bothered to make breakfast for me."

"Think you'll be able to work in the bank today?" Bessie asked, ignoring the thanks.

"Yes, that is—if I still have a job."

"I think you will. George A. is funny. He's kinda big. Never holds petty grudges like the rest of us."

"Is there any news?" Daphne asked stiffly.

"Yes, I guess there is," Bessie answered tonelessly. "They're holding Hondo for murder."

"Oh."

"He didn't kill Ozark, but he gave himself up."

"I wish I could believe that."

"Eat your breakfast."

"Anyway," Daphne persisted, "they were torturing that man, whether they killed him or not. Even if somebody else had been tortured, it was inhuman."

"Yes. I guess it was," Bessie sighed. "But it settled one thing."

"What was that?"

"Just before he was shot, Ozark confessed that he knew who had murdered my husband," Bessie said. "You see, Hondo knew that the only way to ever prove anything was to force a confession from Ozark. But instead it didn't pan out. Now it looks like Hondo himself will be hanged."

The ominous words gave Daphne as much mental pain as a barbed wire suddenly striking could have hurt her body. She didn't want Hondo Horn to be hanged, despite his numerous crimes. And, now that she had had time to think it over, she was not nearly so sure that somebody else might not have shot Ozark. She started to get her things.

"Come on back and drink some coffee," Bessie ordered kindly.

Daphne stopped. "You've every right to hate me," she said. "Why do you insist on treating me with kindness?"

"Frankly, you've got me there," Bessie said. "Maybe Hondo sized it up when he said, 'She wouldn't be much good if she didn't fight for her brother, if she think's he's innocent'."

"Hondo Horn said that?"

"Last night. In fact, I think he's in love with you."

"Wh-what?" Daphne gasped. "That man in love with me? Why it's ridiculous."

"Everybody's ridiculous in some way," Bessie philosophized. "Me more than anybody. I'm in love with Hondo, Hondo is in love with you, and you are trying to hang him. By rights I should have put poison in

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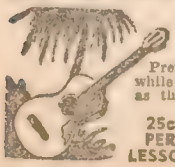

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that coffee you're drinking, but I didn't. Maybe it's because I know Hondo never would marry me anyway. Maybe it's because I love him so much I can't help liking the people he likes."

Overwhelmed, Daphne burst into tears.

HONDO HORN heard Ace Gillette and Dr. Beck coming along the road and stopped. They were riding in a democrat wagon, with the deputy's saddle horse tied behind the rig. "Looking for me, Ace?" Hondo asked.

"Yes. Where's the body?" the deputy countered crisply.

"I left it at Thornberry's."

"Where's Pat Young?"

"He went after a clean shirt. Don't let me detain you. I'm on my way to see the sheriff."

"I wonder if I can bank on that?" Gillette wondered.

"Why not? Ever know me to lie?" Hondo challenged.

"No, but this is the first time you've been charged with murder. And there seems to be some new evidence in the Dixon case."

"I'm going in to surrender if the sheriff wants me," Hondo said evenly, "but I don't count on being taken in against my will."

"Okay, Hondo," Gillette said. "I believe you. But if you don't show up, I'll be after you, and I won't be bluffing either."

In town Hondo talked with the sheriff, and learned that Daphne had been at the courthouse with Bessie.

"I'd arrest you for murder, Hondo, except for one thing," Sheriff Watson told him. "That girl says she didn't see either of you have a gun in your hand. But I'll have to hold you till Ace and Doc gets back with the body."

"All right, Sheriff, you're the doctor."

"Evidently you must have got your education among the Apaches," the sheriff drawled. "What did you get out of him?"

"An admission that Tim Bell was murdered last fall."

"Hunh? Who done that?" Watson blurted.

"I was just about to find out when a bullet cut short the conversation."

"You must have had some reason to suspect him."

"I had. Just suppositions which I couldn't very well prove, and a lie or two."

"Such as?"

"Such as the Thornberrys lying about being home on a certain Tuesday last fall. You remember they claimed to be fixing fence all day, all four of 'em. You ride out there, you'll find their fence hasn't been repaired for years."

"Then you think Tim Bell was murdered by the Thornberrys?"

"It might have been one of them, or somebody they paid to do it. Tim was killed the day after we thought he was."

"Well, in a way, it's too bad you got interrupted," the sheriff stated. "But you're lucky not to be hanged for it. By the way, where's Bill Older?"

"Who?"

"Alias Pat Young—*vice versa.*"

"Been messing around, have you, sheriff?"

"That's my job, Hondo. When you were sent up for robbin' that bank, the man who voluntarily came back and confessed that he was the fellow who held the horses outside the bank called himself Bill Older. But he was an old friend of yours named Pat Young. When he broke out of the pen a while back, he came to you for protection, and you gave it to him. Aiding a criminal to escape the law is a crime, Hondo."

"I didn't know Pat had broke jail. I thought he had been pardoned," Hondo said slowly. "But it wouldn't have made any difference. I'd have helped him anyway."

"That's the wrong attitude, Hondo."

"Maybe. Pat was wrong, but he was a hot-headed kid, and the men who robbed that bank had got him stirred up by telling him how the man who owned the bank had pulled a lot of dirty tricks—which he had."

"That didn't make Pat or the others a judge or jury," the sheriff pointed out. "I've got to know where he is."

"He's gone south."

The eyes of the two men met and clinched. "I don't believe it," Sheriff Watson said flatly.

HONDO was still in the sheriff's office when Gillette and Beck returned.

"Git the body?" the sheriff asked.

"Yes. It's on a slab at the undertaker's," Ace Gillette said. "I brought over his undershirt."

Ace spread the shirt out on the sheriff's desk. The back of it showed extensive powder burns!

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"If Ozark had been shot from a distance the way you said he was, Hondo," the sheriff pointed out slowly, "there wouldn't have been any powder marks on that undershirt."

Hondo didn't answer.

"What was your findin', Doc?" the sheriff asked.

"He died almost instantly. The bullet went clear through his carcass, so of course we've no way of knowing whether it came from Hondo's gun or not."

"Could a slug from a .45 such as Hondo carries have gone clear through a man?"

"Fired from that distance, it could easily."

"Guess we'll have to fix you up a cell, Hondo. Better not put him too close to Willard Dixon, Ace," the sheriff directed.

Hondo went quietly to his cell. The sheriff had wanted to believe in his innocence, and so, perhaps, had the deputy. But in view of that bloody, powder-blackened undershirt they couldn't doubt.

Those marks had not been there when Ozark had been killed. Daphne could testify to that fact if she wanted to. But she couldn't be expected to remove a rope from around Hondo's neck and put it around the neck of her brother.

DAPHNE wasn't sure she would be welcome at the bank, but she meant to report for work. She was not, however, destined to do so. Slick Abel met her just before she reached the bank.

"You'll have to come with me to my office, at once," he said emphatically.

"I suppose," she said, "it has something to do with the Ozark murder."

"Yes, but we won't discuss it on the street," he said shortly. He let her into his office, and locked the door. Daphne sat gingerly upon the edge of a chair.

"Fate must be working on our side, for you to have witnessed that murder yesterday," he commenced. "Quite a shock to see the life let out of a husky man right before your eyes, wasn't it?" He asked the question almost eagerly.

"I didn't actually see the man killed," she replied as quietly as she could. "It was shock enough to come out of a faint and see him dying."

"You mean you were in a faint when the shot was fired?"

"Yes. I had fainted, but I don't know how long I was unconscious. I have the impression

that it was the sound of the shot that roused me."

"You didn't hear Ozark say anything then?" he asked eagerly.

"No—only to beg for mercy."

Abel leaned back in his chair and lighted a cigar. His relief over something was evident. Daphne waited.

"There was a six-shooter in Horn's hand, of course, when you revived," he shot out.

"No, there wasn't."

"What? How can you say that if it was the shot that revived you? He couldn't have had time to restore it to the holster."

"He didn't have a gun in his hand. Neither did the other man."

Abel didn't like that at all. "Means nothing," he said. "A fast gunman like Hondo Horn could have holstered his gun in half a second. The shot was probably fired several seconds before you opened your eyes."

"That may be, but the man was still suspended," she said.

He glared. "What were your first words?"

"I'm not exactly sure. I think I called Hondo a murderer."

"Ah! I want the exact words."

"Well, as nearly as I can remember," she said tiredly, "I said, 'You murderer!' Just that."

"And he said—?"

" 'We didn't kill him.' "

"And you said—?"

"I asked him what was the use of lying to me," she answered, trying hard to recall the exact words. "I said, 'I'm not blind. Now I suppose you'll murder me to cover up your crime.' But—"

"Never mind the 'buts'," he interrupted. "The fact remains that at the time you were convinced in your mind that Hondo Horn had shot Ozark while the man was helplessly suspended in the air."

Daphne said nothing.

"That is true, isn't it?" he demanded.

"Yes, but—"

"That is what you will testify on the witness stand. Now we come to an even more important point. The powder burns on Ozark's undershirt. You noticed those, of course."

"No, I did not!" she denied vehemently.

"But they were there, and you got a good

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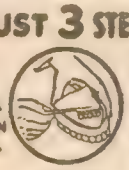
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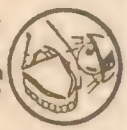
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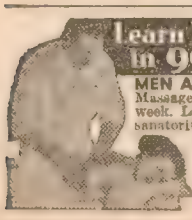

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look at the back of his shirt—or didn't you?"

"Yes, I did."

"And the undershirt showed very pronounced burns, didn't it?"

"It did not. Except for the blood it looked very clean, although it had been torn at the shoulder. The only smudge on it was where they seemed to have struck him with a whip. But I noticed that while the man was still alive."

ABEL glared at her through clouds of cigar smoke until she began to fidget uneasily.

"How do you account for the fact, then, that the undershirt which the officers took off the dead man shows very pronounced powder burns—as if a gun had been fired at it from a distance of not more than three feet?" he demanded belligerently.

"I don't know," she replied in a quavering voice. "I only know there were no powder marks on it when the body was loaded onto the horse."

"But that," Abel said gently, "is not what you're going to testify."

"Do you think that I would go on the witness stand and swear to a lie?" she demanded hotly.

"Why not? You paid Bill Burgess a thousand dollars to do it."

Daphne had half risen. She sank back in her chair with every bit of color drained from her face.

"I paid him a thousand dollars to tell the truth!" she cried defensively, but already she knew that it wasn't true.

"I'm your lawyer," Abel said with an air of long suffering tolerance. "Why pretend anything with me? You know, and I know, and your brother knows that Bill Burgess never saw Hondo give Willard any money."

"You'll be saying next, I suppose that Hondo didn't give him any money at all," Daphne said weakly.

"Of course he didn't. You weren't fooled about that, too, were you?"

"You mean that Willard is a thief, after all?" she forced herself to ask.

"I didn't say that," Abel smiled. "Hondo didn't give him any money. He was up there feeding cattle which he knew were stolen, so the assumption must be that he intended to profit from the sale of them."

"Oh, I'm sick of it all, and I'm sick of you!" Daphne cried out in utter disgust. "If Willard is guilty, he'll have to plead guilty. I'll have no part in destroying the character of an innocent man."

His eyes seemed to hold her to her chair. "You mean Horn? You saw an example of his character yesterday, didn't you?"

"If you are trying to frame him for stealing, you would try to frame him for murder, too." she charged.

"Perhaps," he smiled. "Hondo is a dangerous man. The country would suit me a great deal better, and be vastly more profitable to me and my friends if Hondo were eliminated. Therefore—" he shrugged— "I eliminate him."

"Not with my help, you won't," Daphne said fiercely, at last forcing herself to her feet.

"What about your brother?" Abel asked mildly.

"He said he *wanted* to be convicted. He'll have to get his wish."

"But he was talking about conviction for the theft of the cattle," he pointed out as she reached the door. "Not about being convicted of murder."

DAPHNE stopped as suddenly as if he had dropped a rope around her shoulders. "What—did you say?"

"I was talking about murder, my dear. I didn't want ever to have to spring this on you, but your own refusal to cooperate makes it necessary. The man Willard murdered was named Tim Bell. He was Bessie's husband. He was a lucky gambler. Your brother liked to gamble. Tim Bell won all Willard's wages in a poker game. Because he suspected that Bell was crooked, Willard shot Bell where it would appear someone had done it accidentally.

"Unfortunately for Willard there were no less than four witnesses to the crime. To make sure they could prove it if they wanted to, they relieved Willard of an I O U note for five hundred dollars made out on a Bell Feed & Livery Company letterhead and signed by your brother, which he hadn't had a chance to destroy. That note is still in existence, and three of the four witnesses are still alive."

With perhaps the greatest effort of her life Daphne forced herself to be calm.

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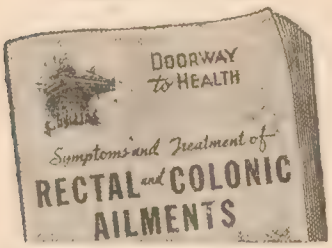

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"The witness who is dead, I presume, is the man called Ozark," she said.

"You're catching on fast, my dear. Those men wanted to get rid of Hondo Horn. For one thing, Hondo was the only one who suspected that Bell had been murdered, and evenutally he would have uncovered the truth. So it was to Willard's interest, aside from the fact that he had no choice, to feed those stolen cattle, and then accuse Hondo of paying him to do it.

"Thanks to the testimony of Bill Burgess, Willard will be acquitted. When that happens there will be nothing for the sheriff to do except arrest Hondo for the theft—unless he is convicted of murder before then. That is what we intend to fight for."

"To convict Hondo of killing Ozark when you know that he didn't do it?"

"I propose to convict him," he said grimly.

"And that means that—that I—"

"It means that you listen quietly while Bill Burgess gives his testimony in your brother's case, and when Hondo is arraigned for murder you will go on the stand and testify that when you saw Ozark's undershirt immediately after the murder, it was in exactly the same condition in which it will appear in the courtroom," Abel said harshly.

"I will not do it!" Daphne cried out her refusal. "What you think I am, a murderess?"

"You'll be responsible for the hanging of your own brother if you refuse," Abel told her grimly. "And you go to the penitentiary yourself for subornation of perjury. I hate to remind you, but I happen to hold your note for five hundred dollars, which is proof that you used a considerable sum of money as soon as you got here. In addition I took the precaution of getting a signed statement from Bill Burgess confessing that he agreed to commit perjury for the sum of one thousand dollars advanced by you."

"And what if I tell the truth about the whole thing?" Daphne demanded wildly.

"My dear girl, must you insult my intelligence? I have documentary proof to support my case. Your word would be totally unsupported. And think of the motive! The saving of your brother's life."

Once Daphne had seen a terrified little kitten cornered by a savage dog. She knew now exactly how that kitten had felt.

(To be continued in the next issue)

WITH TEX SHERMAN

EDITOR'S NOTE: From coast to coast the contestants and the men who produce rodeo are Tex Sherman's friends, and this wide knowledge Mr. Sherman has placed at the disposal of readers of Ranch Romances. If you have a question about rodeo, write to Tex Sherman, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y., and enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Mr. Sherman will then send you a personal reply.

THE recent Texas Cowboy Reunion held at Stamford, Texas, really blew all attendance records sky high. There were over 300 cowboys and cowgirls entered. Instead of the usual single parade before the opening of the rodeo, they staged two this year. The second was to boost the sale of war bonds, and they did a great job of it.

Charley Featherstone was elected president of the Texas Cowboy Association, succeeding Kid Jeffers of Brady, Texas. Morris Cooper won both the saddle bronc riding and the bareback bronc riding honors. Weldon Johnson won the calf roping event with the average time of 32 seconds. Joe Sam Gray won the steer riding contest; and Jim Maddox, riding "Snooks," won the cutting horse contest.

John Daro's Circle A Rodeo put over a mighty nice show lately in Riverview Park at Sioux City, Iowa. The big feature of the rodeo turned out to be the Royal Riders, a troupe of 25 juvenile riders and ropers who just plain stole the show from the old-timers. The ages of these wonder kids was from six years to 17. Tom Aumann was the arena director, with Jerry Lee assistant arena director. Gail Thomas, one of rodeo's prettiest cowgals, was a hit in the cowgirls' bronc riding.

The All-Bay Area Shipyards Rodeo staged in the Kezar Stadium in San Francisco, California, drew a record crowd of 12,000 for one day. It was a swell show, well staged and directed, although the trick ropers had a lot of trouble because of the high winds during the performance. Sgt. Fritz Truan made a big hit with the crowds when he turned out and contested in uniform. Other top hands in the lineup were John Bowman, Frank Schneider and Leonard Block. Homer Holcomb clowned the show. Abe Lefton handled the announcing. Harry Rowell of Hayward, California, furnished over 400 head of stock for the rodeo.

Al Humke, the wizard of Anderson, Indiana, staged his first big rodeo at Muncie and drew a big crowd, 6,000 at one Sunday afternoon performance. The late Herb Maddy, who at his death was business manager of the JE, was at one time chief of detectives in Humke's home town, Anderson.

Out in Ecorse, Michigan, the Y Cross outfit, operated by Ed Rais, played a six-day show at the fair grounds in spite of bad weather. The names of the contestants all sounded new to me, except Tuffy Grant and Joe Flores, a Mexican boy who is plenty good. Rose Flores and Minnie Atkins rode broncs, which the kids liked, and Buster Todd, the announcer, also took a crack at horse roping. Good show, plenty action!

San Saba, Texas, sold over $20,000 worth of War Bonds during their three-day rodeo. Gross receipts for the show were $6,300, a mighty good showing for a town of San Saba's size.

Word has reached us that Jack Miller died suddenly at Hand Hills, Alberta, Canada, this summer. Jack directed and promoted the Hand Hills Stampede since 1917.

Adios,

Tex Sherman

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 20 years Our Air Mail has been running between reader and reader of Ranch Romances, making for them new friends in near and far-off places. Any reader may write directly to anyone whose letter is printed in this department, provided he upholds the clean, wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended solely for those who really want correspondents. We ask you to refrain from using it as a medium for practical jokes and particularly not to sign your letters with other people's names. In accordance with the wishes of the War and Navy Departments, we print no letters to or from service men. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y.

Lass From the Buckeye State

Dear Editor:

This is my second try at crashing Our Air Mail, and I hope I'm successful this time. Am a lass from the Buckeye state. Am 18 years old and have dark brown hair and hazel eyes. My favorite hobby is writing and receiving letters. Would like to hear from boys and girls all over the world. Please, everybody, keep my mailman busy.

EDNA MAE SHANER

451 Fairview St.,
Nelsonville, O.

Cheerful China Doll!

Dear Editor:

Here's a Double R fan, hoping her plea will be printed! I'm a Chinese girl in my teens—have black hair and dark brown eyes. Would love to hear from boys and girls from 15 to 22 years of age. I'll also exchange snapshots, postcards and souvenirs. Come on, now, boys and girls, here's a chance for you to write to a cheerful China doll!

FAY LYN

Mandeville, Jamaica,
British West Indies

Her Fingers Are Crossed!

Dear Editor:

I'm crossing my fingers hoping that you'll print my plea for pen pals. I recently started reading RANCH ROMANCES, and I think it's a swell magazine. Am a Mexican girl of 17 and have dark brown hair and dark eyes. I like to skate and ride a bicycle. My favorite hobbies are collecting costume jewelry and collecting pictures of movie and radio stars. Come on, and scribble something my way. Will answer every letter. Don't disappoint me.

SALLY PULIDO

Gen. Del.,
Lincoln, Calif.

Small-Town Girl

Dear Editor:

I am a small-town girl of 14. Have blond hair, grey eyes and freckles across my nose. My father runs a dairy and my mother works while I keep house. My hobby is collecting postcards and letters. Also like to save snapshots. So, come on, everybody, write to me and send a snapshot!

KATHERINE SCOTT

c/o Bass Dairy,
Alamogordo, N. M.

From the Canadian Rockies

Dear Editor:

Can a lonely girl from the Canadian Rockies have a little space in Our Air Mail? I'm a young Canadian girl with dark brown hair and grey eyes. I enjoy all sports, and especially like to dance and listen to cowboy music. I'll be waiting to hear from all you boys and girls.

DORIS HYNES

Parson P.O.,
Parson, B. C.,
Canada

She Likes to Make Friends

Dear Editor:

If there's anything I like, it's receiving and answering mail. I'm a hard-working girl, but wouldn't mind that if I knew I had mail waiting for me. I'm 19, have brown eyes and light brown hair and my favorite pastime is making friends. Am especially interested in hearing from Georgia boys, but everyone is welcome. Hope I won't be disappointed.

PARALEE SISKE

114 S. Marshall St.,
Winston-Salem, 7, N. C.

Fifth Attempt

Dear Editor:

This is the fifth time I've written to you, but there's no harm in trying again. Am 17 years old, have blue eyes and brown hair. I love to write letters and I promise to answer every letter received. Am a member of the Trail's End Club. Will be looking forward to lots of letters.

ELINORE FENTON

301 16th Ave.,
Munhall, Penna.

What Do You Say?

Dear Editor:

Will you please print this plea in Our Air Mail? Am a lonely girl from Oklahoma and would like to have pen pals everywhere from 16 to 21 years of age. Am 16 and have brown hair and blue eyes. Won't someone correspond with me? Come on and give me a trial. What do you say?

MAXINE SMITH

P.O. Box 34,
Henryetta, Okla.

Lonely Girl From Maine

Dear Editor:

I'm a reader of your wonderful magazine, and I certainly enjoy it. Hope you can squeeze this letter in Our Air Mail. I'm a very lonely girl of 15 and have dark brown hair and eyes. My hobbies are swimming, singing cowboy songs, writing and collecting snapshots. Will exchange snaps. Won't someone write to a lonely Maine girl?

BERNICE KING

73 Church St.,
Oakland, Me.

Folks Say She's Pretty

Dear Editor:

I'm a girl of 16 who is very lonesome. Would like to have folks write to me. Especially boys and girls from 16 to 19 years of age. I'm a Colorado girl and have brown hair and hazel eyes. People say I'm pretty!

BONNIE BOCKMAN

189 Beechwood Dr.,
[illegible], 15, Kans.

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 39)

1. Mostly a golden yellow.

2. Horses get up front feet first, cattle hind feet first.

3. From 900 to 1,100 pounds, approximately. Old-time cowponies were generally smaller.

4. Cheyenne, Wyoming, named for the Indian tribe which the French fur trappers called *chiens*, probably because they had lots of dogs around their teepees.

5. Montana.

6. No. When driving cattle, cowponies frequently nip them around the top of the hips to make 'em git along.

7. Different breeds or blood strains of Brahma cattle.

8. A centerfire saddle is one on which the cinch ring is rigged fairly near the middle (endwise) of the saddle. A saddle with the cinch ring well forward is a rimfire—frequently with a second cinch well to the rear, in which case it is a double rig.

9. Ben Thompson.

10. About 100 minerals contain copper, and the color signs are varied. Chiefly emerald green, deep blue, dull rusty red and a metallic-looking black.

General George Armstrong Custer
(1839-1876)

SHALL I MARRY?

By Professor Marcus Mari

BORN on Dec. 5th, the fabulous hero of Little Big Horn, General George Custer, was ever under those two strong signs, Libra and Scorpio. His will power and determination in face of desperate danger and his courage despite overwhelming odds motivated his entire life and were finally instrumental in the West's most historic battle.

When he was twenty-two years old he graduated from West Point and was sent at once into the raging Civil War, right into the Battle of Bull Run. Soon thereafter he was made head of the cavalry brigade at Gettysburg. Then he led the final cavalry charge at Appomattox courthouse. His life began taking its very breath from physical excitement and action.

However, the following year, after an expedition against the Cheyenne Indians in Kansas, a gentler influence crept into his zodiacal stars and he retired for five years, thinking he had seen enough of death and wars. He was wrong, however, and when Mars overshadowed his sign, he lept to get back into the fight that was going on then to conquer the West. So 1876 found him in Montana at the fore of the most frightful battle between the whites and the braves in the entire history of the West.

This was the battle of Little Big Horn, when Custer, with only two hundred and sixty-four men, was pitted against thousands of battle-crazed and savage Indians. All of the General's men were killed—and so was he. There was not a white man left alive all along the Little Big Horn River.

It is ironic, however, that today the Custer Battlefield Highway, running fifteen hundred miles from Des Moines to Glacier National Park, cuts through two Indian reservations! General Custer had not died in vain. His stars had served him—and his country—well.

Professor Mari will be glad to give a personal reading to anyone who sends this coupon to him in care of Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y. ENCLOSE STAMPED AND SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE.

Name .....Sex.....

Address .....

.....

Exact date of birth: Year.....Month.....

Day of Month..... 10-20-44

Your Intuitive Impressions

ARE YOU EVER A HOST TO STRANGE IDEAS? Do amazing thoughts suddenly enter your mind in the still of night? Have you ever experienced a curtain seeming to rise in your mind and then, for the flash of a second—on the stage of your consciousness—is portrayed a dramatic event? Perhaps at such times you see yourself in a strange role surrounded by unknown personalities. Who has not awakened some morning with a partial recollection of a provoking dream which clings to the mind throughout the day? There are also times when we are inclined by an inexplicable feeling to cast off our obligations and to journey to a distant city or to visit a friend. Only sheer will prevents us from submitting to these urges. What do these intuitive impressions, these impelling *strange feelings* mean? Should we interpret these impressions as originating in an intelligence outside of us—or are they merely organic, the innate functioning of our own mental processes? Do not labor under superstition nor disregard what truly may be *Cosmic Guidance*. Learn the facts about these common experiences.

Accept This Free Book

Every inclination of *self*, which you sense, has a purpose. Nature is not extravagant. Every faculty you possess was intended to be exercised—*to be used* for the mastery of life. There are no mysteries in life—except those which prejudice, fear and ignorance keep men from understanding. Let the Rosicrucians (not a religion), a world-wide fraternity of men and women, reveal astounding and useful facts about *you*. Write for the free, fascinating book, "The Mastery of Life." It tells how you may share in this age-old helpful knowledge.

Address SCRIBE: Q. L. C.

The ROSICRUCIANS ✯ AMORC ✯ SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA

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